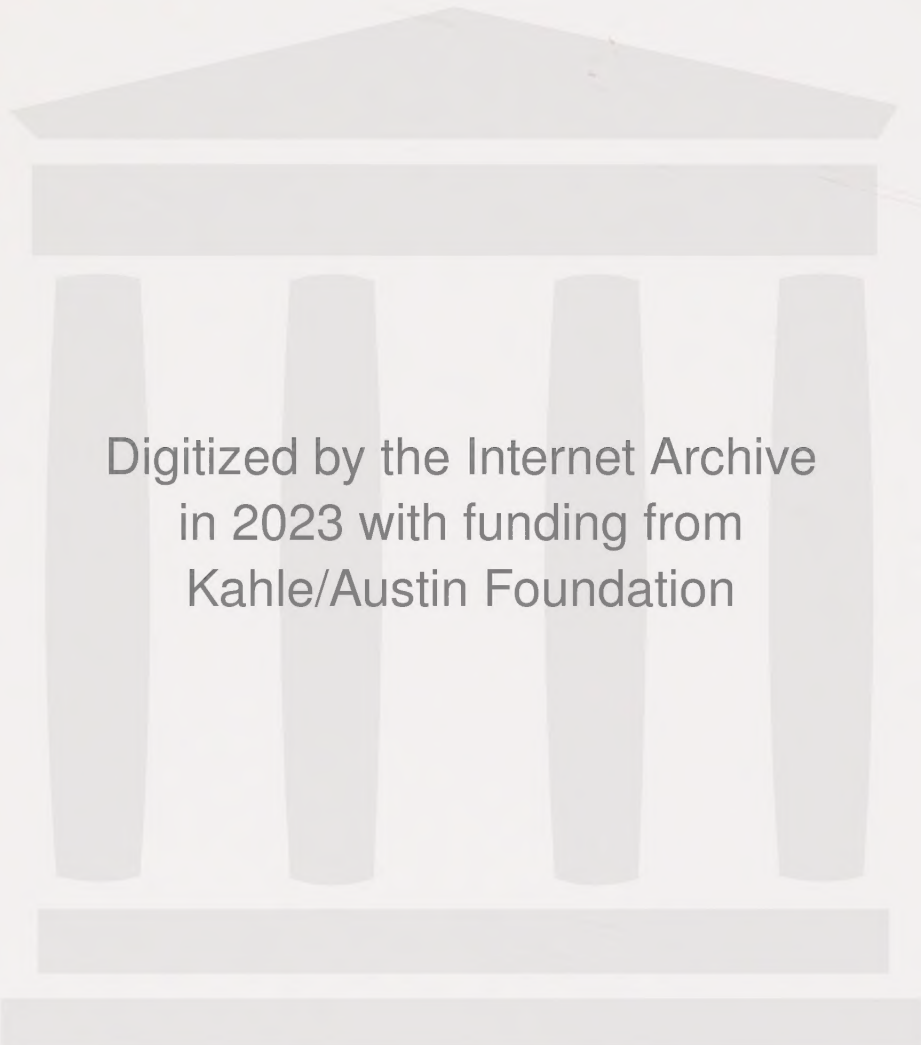


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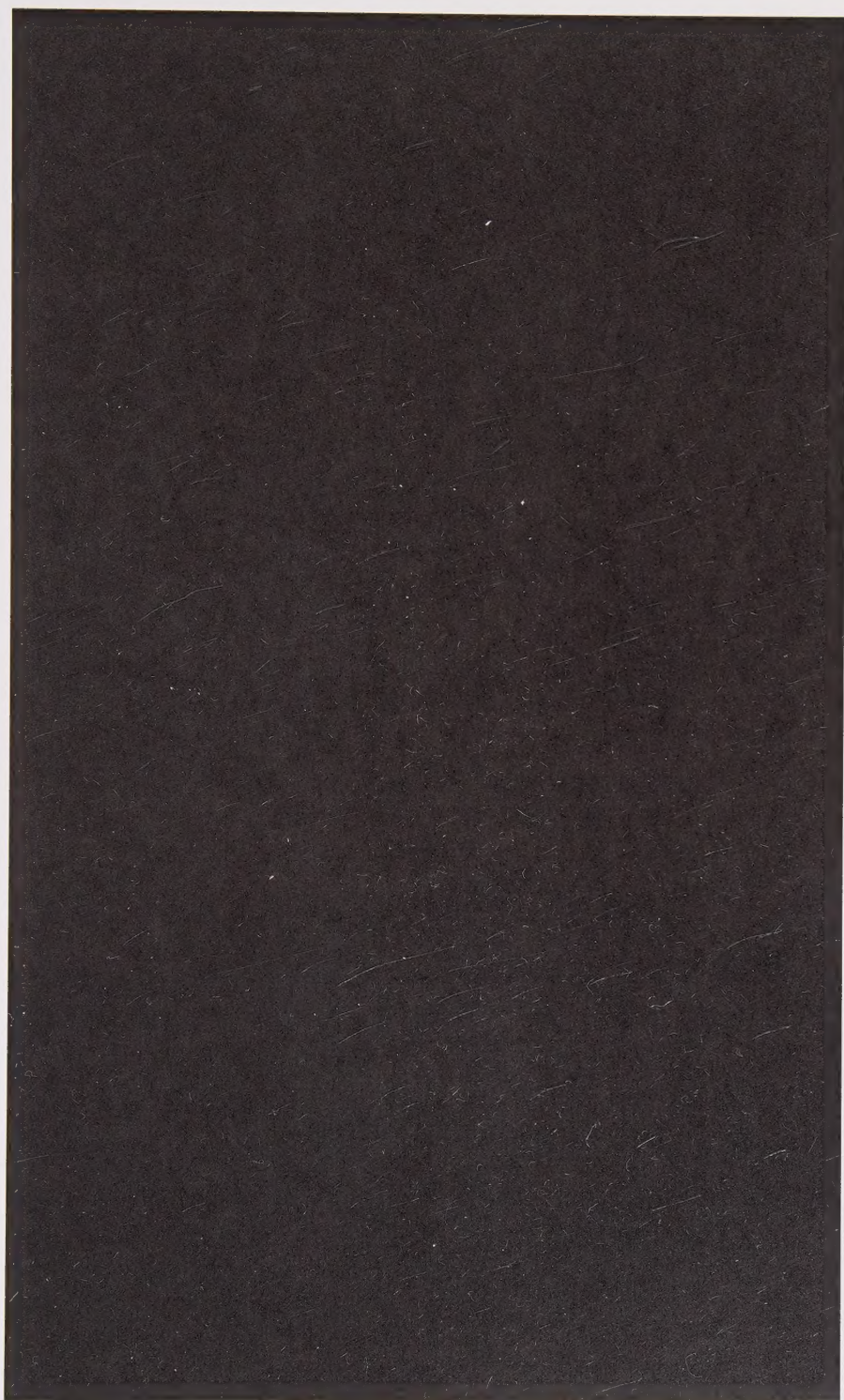
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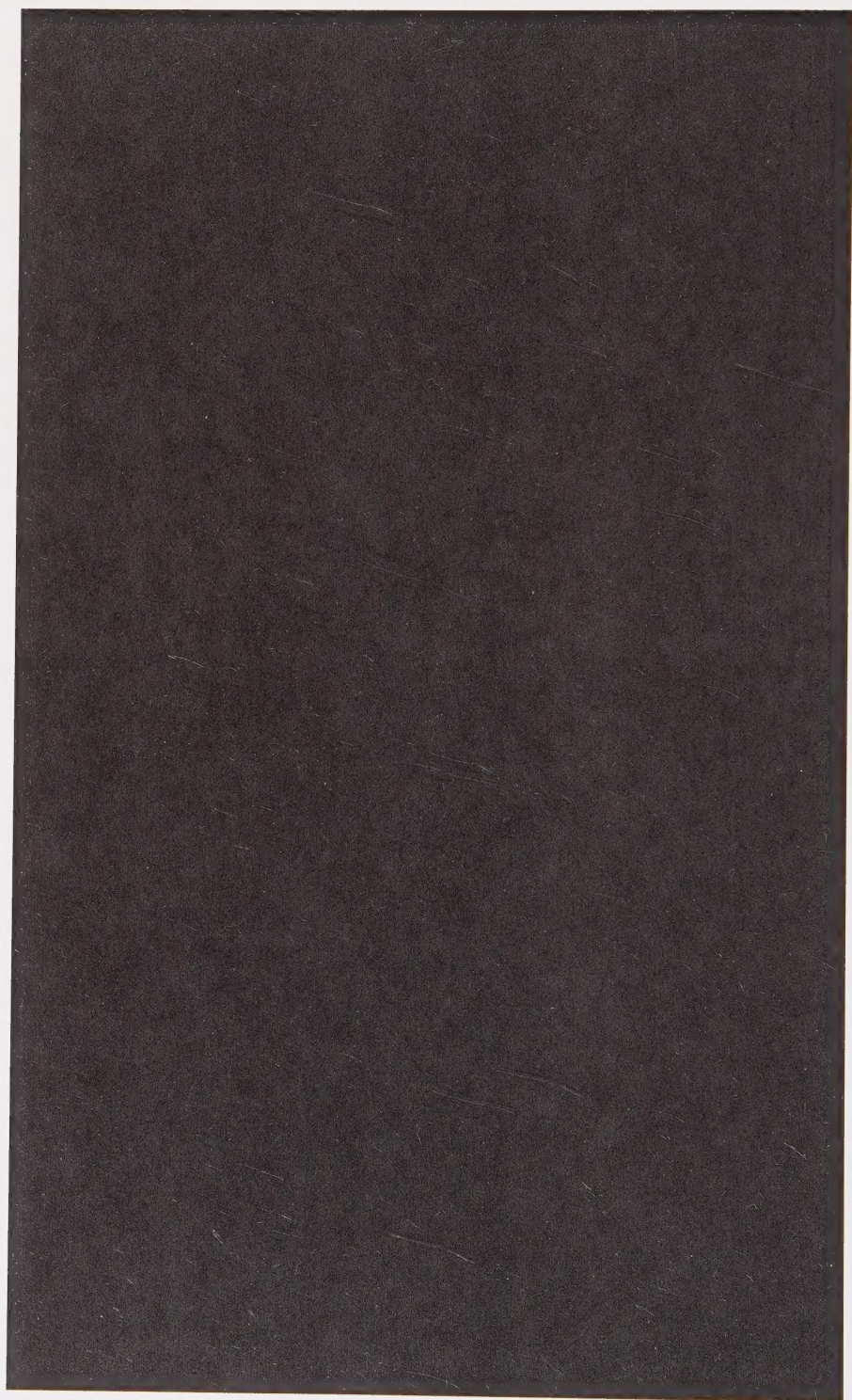
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Sybil shrieked with ecstasy at every fresh demonstration of her very lively charger.

PAGE 61.

D O N - k

BY THE AUTHOR

OF

'LADDIE,' 'MISS TOOSEY'S MISSION,' 'TIP-CAT,'
'POMONA,' ETC.

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY J. FINNIEMORE

W. & R. CHAMBERS, LIMITED
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D O N.

CHAPTER I.

MRS HARRINGTON'S BALL.

No sleep till morn, when Youth and Pleasure meet
To chase the glowing hours with flying feet—
But, hark !—that heavy sound breaks in once more.

BYRON.



IT was the evening of Mrs Harrington's ball, and that, as everyone would tell you who knew anything of society for the last few years, was one of the best of the season. It was early in May, and there was a keen east wind blowing, which made the ladies, alighting from their carriages in Brooke Street, under the red and white awning, draw up their white, fur-lined cloaks to their dainty chins and hasten up the carpeted doorsteps, and the coachmen resolve that they would not return till nearly an hour after the time at which carriages were ordered.

Every time the door opened to admit fresh arrivals, a blaze of light poured out, and a view might be obtained for a moment of the thronged staircase, gay dresses and bright gems, and the strains of dance music burst out, mingled with the hum of conversation, suddenly hushed as the door closed again.

Even in that searching east wind a handful of people gathered round the entrance to watch the arrivals, and peer in at the brightness within, and some even lingered at the other side of the street looking up at the brightly-lighted house, though little enough was to be seen from there except the hurrying shadows of the dancers on the awning which closed in the drawing-room balcony. In one of the upper windows firelight shone on the blind, and if any of the watchers outside had looked up so high, they might have seen a small shadow pass and repass the window.

It was the nursery window, and the small shadow was that of Mrs Harrington's little girl, Sybil. Bedtime had been rather hastened that evening, for Mrs Vestris the maid had told Jessie the nurse that, if the child was asleep, she might come down and help take the ladies' cloaks, so every effort was made to induce sleepiness in the blue eyes that were more than usually wide-awake that evening, and to discourage the brisk little questions that came from the small blue cot.

And then, just as the child was really beginning to

get sleepy, and the funny little voice grew dreamy and vague in some anecdote of 'Sybil's kitty,' who should come into the nursery but the mistress herself, all dressed and lovely, tall and fair, with the diamonds on her white neck flashing in the dim light like living things? And she picked the all-too-willing child out of her crib, and sat down in the rocking-chair by the fire, and the little, rough, curly head lay on the white neck by the diamonds, and the small, warm hands clung round the beautiful, bare arms, while the rosy feet nestled among the satin and lace so carefully arranged ten minutes ago by Mrs Vestris's skilful hands.

It really was enough to provoke the most patient and long-suffering of lady's-maids, and Mrs Vestris was inclined to give warning on the spot, while Jessie felt herself equally ill-used, for what child would be likely to go off to sleep again after being roused up like that and excited out of all chance of sleepiness, so that she might be awake half the night?

'Ladies is so inconsiderate!' And to talk such rubbish to the child, too! Asking if she had said her prayers. Of course Miss Sybil had said her prayers! Jessie had not lived nurse in high families for ten years without knowing what was right and proper. Prayers night and morning as regular as bathing, and grace before meals or no pudding. Even the

babies under a twelvemonth could be taught to fold fat hands and say 'Ta!' over their bread and milk.

It was not usual for the mistress to make such a fuss over the child; she was fond enough of her, and liked to see her playing about in the drawing-room as long as she was good, but the nursery bell was rung directly the child got cross or troublesome. And she was never one to mess a child about, and crumple its sash or pinafore, like some mammas, who make a regular bundle of a baby before it has been five minutes in the drawing-room. Master was much more one of that sort, and Miss Sybil was never fit to be seen when she had been with 'her par.' To-night it did not matter as far as the child was concerned, as she was in her little night-gown, and the only damage was waking her up so conclusively; but Mrs Harrington was generally very particular about her dress, and to-night she seemed reckless about it. And after the child had been put back in her crib, with something shining on her curls in the firelight that might have been one of her mother's diamonds dropped from its setting, Mrs Harrington stood for a minute or two by the hearth warming a little satin-clad foot on the fender, with her back turned to the observant nurse, and, when she went, a lace handkerchief, rolled up into a little, damp ball, lay on the rug, and the powder-box was called largely into requisition before she came down into the drawing-

room, lovely and radiant and bright, and in the highest spirits.

‘Well, if no one else enjoyed herself, Mrs Harrington did,’ Lady Marsham said, as she drove away, and she was a keen observer of human nature.

‘If I were Mr Harrington, I think I would rather she enjoyed herself less,’ said the elder Miss Marsham, whose enjoyment of the evening had depended largely on one person who had devoted himself exclusively to Mrs Harrington.

It is wonderful what nonsense—and amusing nonsense, too—the lips can chatter, with the heart all the time in a strain of agony. A touch of recklessness gives a point to wit. I daresay the fun would have been all the more fast and furious before the Deluge—they would have gone on eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, just the same, or more so—if they had known that the flood would come and take them all away. ‘Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.’ What does anything matter when you are so near the Falls of Niagara, and the smooth, inevitable rush has seized your little, cockle-shell boat? It is almost better not to be too circumspect.

‘And what a capital host Mr Harrington is!’ continued Lady Marsham. ‘I don’t believe he has a thought beyond the entertainment of his guests.’

Which her daughters rightly interpreted to mean that

she had had a good supper, and that the champagne was excellent.

But if little Sybil had been asked, she might have told that, at any rate for ten minutes during the evening, he had a thought for something else besides the entertainment of his guests, and that was for 'Daddy's little girl.'

When at last Jessie had persuaded herself that Sybil was asleep, when she had not said, 'Now, Miss Sybil, shut your eyes and go to sleep like a good girl,' for at least five minutes, nor had straightened the clothes and pulled them up over the chattering, little mouth, and tucked them in firmly to resist the tossings of restless arms and legs, she gave a little frisk-up to her fringe and settled her cap jauntily and made her way to the cloak-room, which was already thronged with earlier comers.

'I thought that child never would go to sleep,' she whispered to Mrs Vestris. 'She's that obstinate if she thinks I particularly want her to.'

'Is she off now?'

'Oh yes, sound as a bell.'

Jessie's wish had certainly been father to the thought as regards Sybil's slumbers, and she had not looked too closely at the curly head on the pillow, and, as a matter of fact, Sybil had sat up directly Jessie was out of the room, and by the time she had reached the cloak-room,

the child was out of her crib and on her way to the doll's cradle in the corner.

Jessie had held up Rosalind, Sybil's new doll, as an example to that young lady. 'There she lies in her cradle, as good as gold, with her eyes shut. *She* never gets up and fidgets and throws the clothes off, and plays with the bars of her crib. *She's* not a tiresome girl, vexing poor nurse.'

Rosalind was an accomplished creature, who closed her eyes when in a horizontal position, leaving the eyelashes still in evidence under the eyebrows. Occasionally, when restored to the perpendicular, the eyes still remained closed, and thumps on the back were necessary to rouse the sleeping beauty. There were also mysterious strings that, on being pulled, produced sounds which, for the sake of argument, we will call 'papa' and 'mamma.'

Daddy had brought Rosalind to Sybil only a day or two ago, so the bloom was not quite kissed off the cheeks, or the hair hopelessly tangled by energetic use of the tiny brush and comb out of the miniature baby's basket provided for its toilette.

There was a delightful feeling of adventure in being out of her crib and across the nursery, and in taking Rosalind up and carrying her to the hearthrug; but, by-and-bye, the excitement of doing such a very naughty thing grew flat, as no one came into the nursery to find

her out and scold her and put her back into bed again, and the strains of music from below came up, and suddenly put it into Sybil's curly head that Rosalind would like to go to the top of the stairs and peep over, as Sybil herself had once been allowed by Jessie to do at a dinner-party, to see the procession going down to dinner: heads, some of them adorned with lace lappets and diamond stars, some of them with wonderful intricacies of hair-dressing, some bald, some close-cropped, some young, some old.

Rosalind was to be trusted to preserve discreet silence if those mysterious strings were not touched, nor would she drop anything over the banisters, whereas Sybil had brought severe rebuke upon Jessie by shouting 'Daddy' with all the strength of her young lungs, when a certain sleek, dark head came in view, and by dropping an elephant from the Noah's Ark, which had descended on the shining bald head of an eminent Q.C., and greatly annoyed that learned man.

And so it happened that some one coming hastily out of one of the bedrooms on the next floor, and, glancing up, saw a doll's head through the banisters above, supposed to be gazing down, though, being held in the horizontal position, its eyes were shut, while a little, pink foot, also protruded through the banisters, proclaimed that the doll was not alone.

On observing these phenomena, the person on the

landing below uttered an exclamation, and came striding up two stairs at a time, and caught Sybil and the doll up and carried them back into the nursery, and sitting down in the rocking-chair held them close in his arms.

It was Daddy himself, who, all that evening, was credited with being unremitting in his attentions as host, and yet who, for the last twenty minutes, had been busily employed in his dressing-room, and now gave ten minutes more to little Sybil in the nursery. Nobody noticed his absence; people had grown so used to seeing him here, there, and everywhere, taking Lady This to have an ice, talking to the Hon. Mrs That in the window, introducing him to her, chatting with General A. or Colonel B., arranging for this window to be opened or another shut, altering the programme, putting in another valse or leaving out a quadrille, holding Miss Beauxyeux' bouquet, or taking Miss Highstepper to have her dress mended.

'I do believe you are ubiquitous, my good fellow,' Major Kingstown said, having just said something spiteful about his hostess's flirtations, and turning, found his host at his elbow.

So, if anyone looking round during that half-hour's absence could not see Mr Harrington, they concluded he was making himself agreeable elsewhere, and, if he were ubiquitous, perhaps in two places elsewhere at once,

though neither of the two places happened to be in sight.

But before anyone noticed his absence, there he was again, taking the Dowager Lady Canterbury down to supper, and keeping that old lady in fits of laughter, that would have been reckoned vulgar in anyone of less exalted rank, by his amusing conversation and his excellent champagne, and no one would have guessed at all the arrangements and preparations he had made in those twenty minutes in his dressing-room, or of the ten minutes in the nursery, holding his baby in his arms for the last time.

‘I thought they was all gone.’ Mr Groves the butler had his coat off, so discreetly kept behind the dining-room door, while his master, fulfilling the part of excellent host to the end, escorted the last remaining guest to her carriage, and William was helping the waiters had in for the occasion in clearing the supper tables.

‘No, I see a brougham waiting when the last party left. Deaf, seemings!’ William remarked, for Mr Harrington’s voice was raised in talking to the lady who leant on his arm.

‘Are you sure you are warm enough, Mrs Masterton? The wind is very keen, and you know the doctors have enjoined the greatest care. My wife will be delighted to lend you an extra wrap, wouldn’t you, my dear?’

calling back to the drawing-room landing where the ladies had bid adieu.

But Mrs Masterton declined further wraps, and certainly she was already well protected from the wind, as the glimpse of her passing the dining-room door allowed those within to see, and her voice in replying was quite muffled by the knitted opera hood drawn over her head.

The brougham was waiting, and Mr Harrington escorted his last guest across the pavement and bid her good-night, standing bareheaded till the carriage drove off, though, as he had said, the wind was cutting and keen.

The little group of curious gazers on the pavement had long since dispersed, only on the other side of the street one solitary figure still lingered under the lamp, perhaps an indefatigable correspondent of some fashionable paper, resolved to describe the gay doings to the very end.

Mr Harrington's eye dwelt curiously on this lingerer before he went back into the house and closed the door, and a little ejaculation escaped him, no doubt of surprise that anyone should voluntarily brave the chilly wind of that early May morning.

But the next moment his voice was heard in gay conversation on the drawing-room landing with his wife, as fresh and lively as if he had not had that long night

of entertaining, than which nothing is so exhausting to mind or body.

He came down again a few minutes later for a glass of sherry, telling Mrs Vestris, whom he met on the stairs, that her mistress had gone up to bed, and would not require her services as it was so late.

‘And a nice state that satin will be in to-morrow morning if I’m not there to see it’s not tossed anyhow on the floor,’ said the ungrateful Abigail to Jessie, who answered with a yawn, ‘Well, it don’t much matter to anyone who can have a new dress every day in the year if she’s a mind to. And I don’t know what you feel, but I shan’t be sorry to be in bed.’

Mr Harrington stood for a minute or two sipping his sherry and talking pleasantly to the men, saying how well they had managed, and how satisfied he was, wiping the wine from his black moustache as he spoke, and then bid them good-night and went up to bed.

‘A pleasant-spoken gentleman,’ the men all agreed.

It was not till nearly half-an-hour afterwards that the waiters and pastry-cook’s men came away, one or two of them not as steady on their legs as might be, and then one by one the lights in the house died away, among the last to disappear being that in Mr Harrington’s dressing-room.

Then, as the May dawn began to creep chilly into the

sky, and the gas-lamps to look dim and dissipated, an observer might have concluded that sleep reigned supreme in the Harrington household,—brief sleep indeed for the poor, little scullery-maid, who would have to be up again at six to light the kitchen fire and begin work over again.

And there *was* an observer to notice the outward signs of quiet in the house, for that solitary figure still stood on the other side of the street, with a watchful eye fixed on the Harringtons' house. The police, as they passed at intervals on their beat, at first looked suspiciously at this man, and then nodded a recognition of him. Even he was somewhat relaxing his watchfulness of the dark and silent house, when the door under the awning, which still flapped limp across the pavement, opened, and someone came out, closing it softly behind him, and the watcher crossed the road swiftly, and met him as he came down the steps.

But it was only another of the pastry-cook's men, who must have been left behind in one of the back regions when his mates left. He was a young, closely-shaven man, with light, curly hair, and he carried one of those green, wooden pastry-cook's trays on his head, and had an apron tucked up under his coat.

'Hillo,' he said, 'it ain't no good your ringing; folks is all abed. My mates served me a shabby trick, and went off without me, but I'll pay 'em out. Good-night to you.'

'Good-night,' was the gruff reply, but the speaker turned and watched the man along the street a little suspiciously, and even followed to the turning, and continued his watch on the retreating figure going leisurely along as a tired man would, in the mixed light of dawn and gas. He came back to the Harringtons' house with a doubtful shake of the head.

'I don't remember seeing that man go in,' he said to himself.





CHAPTER II.

MISS WHATELEY.

The quiet thoughts of one whose feet
Have scarcely left her green retreat ;
A little dew, a little scent,
A little measure of content.

K. TYNAN.

IT is really very difficult to know what to do about planting out geraniums,' Miss Whateley said ; ' some years it is safe to put them out in April, and others frosts come in June and shrivel them up, and they don't get the better of it all the summer. It would be a terrible pity to put them out too soon this year, when they look so uncommonly well ! ' and Miss Whateley put her head on one side, and contemplated with honest pride a row of somewhat spindly-looking plants in her sitting-room window.

Miss Whateley's plants were vegetables with distinct individual characters of their own, with tastes and feelings that had to be studied, and with small, personal

peculiarities which made them very interesting. There was one old fuchsia that she had nursed through so many winters and watered through so many summers, that she felt a sort of reverence mingled with her affection for it, and she would not allow any of the young cuttings to interfere with his prerogatives, or encroach on his warm corner, treating him every bit as she would a peevish, fretful old man, while she made allowances for the young slips as she would for children, checking outrageous exuberance and coaxing and encouraging uprightness and growth.

Each plant had its own particular history, and was not one in a thousand Jacobys (though, by the way, I do not think she had any geraniums of so modern a date), but 'the slip Mr Walter the gardener at Bratton gave me off the plant in the border by the green-house, that I so much admired,—no, not that, my dear, either, but a cutting I made from it, for the one Mr Walter gave me was knocked down by Maria when she was closing the shutter one night, and got broken off close to the root, and though I tied it up at once with wool, and Maria cried dreadfully, she was so vexed at having done it, it never recovered, or shot from the root, as I hoped it might.'

Miss Whateley's house was very small, and the garden on which she bestowed such tender thought was not much more than a dozen paces either way; but

the interest of a garden is by no means dependent on its extent, or, rather, perhaps it is, and decreases in proportion to the larger size. There is a sense of satisfaction and completeness in coming in, even with rather an aching back, knowing that every weed in the garden has been eradicated, and you can follow up a snail without any fear of its escaping you, stalking it from its pasture among the cabbages to its lair in the ivy on the wall or in the box-edging, and you can exterminate slugs hip and thigh, if those creatures possess such limbs, which is doubtful.

But the care and anxiety of a small garden are also out of proportion to its size. The hail-storm, that broke acres of glass round Hayhurst, broke Miss Whateley's one little hand-light, under which cuttings had been coaxed and sheltered, and seeds brought on in a way unknown, or perhaps unnoticed, in large crystal palaces; and though cracked tumblers and wine-glasses that had lost their stems were brought into requisition to replace the hand-light, they were found rather crampy and confined.

So, too, when the gate was left open one night, and Mrs Lane's donkey came in, he worked such havoc as made Miss Whateley doubt if the place would ever be the same again, and she had not even the relief of being very angry and rating the owner of the beast, seeing that Mrs Lane was a widow, and her boy laid up with

rheumatic fever; and the donkey himself had such a very thick, shaggy coat that the knock Miss Whateley gave him with her parasol, which, she felt directly she had given it, was spiteful and ill-natured, only caused him to wag his tail gently, and cock one soft, furry ear, and Miss Whateley was so filled with compunction that she went to fetch one of the few remaining cabbage-leaves to make her peace with him.

So, too, wet seasons and dry seasons told more on Miss Whateley's little plot than on larger domains, where, if one crop failed, another throve and took its place, though, to be sure, in dry seasons her plants were better off for watering than many larger places with a regiment of lazy gardeners, and in one wet season she had been known to put up her own umbrella over a patch of petunias that were getting very washed out and draggled with the persistent rainfall.

Miss Whateley's house stood about half-way up the village street at Hayhurst, and was a little, square house, such as a child would draw on a slate, with the door in the middle, a window on each side, and three windows over, and a steep slate roof surmounted at one side by a chimney, out of which, on the slate, would pour clouds of smoke smeared on with the finger, but in reality only emitted a modest little puff, seeing that coals were a consideration to Miss Whateley's limited income.

The house had been built before the word 'picturesque'

had penetrated so far into the country. I do not know when it was introduced into England; it is not in Johnson, and I am sometimes inclined to think that we should have done better without it, as the strain after it in dress and house decoration becomes somewhat excessive. Those old, black-beamed, gabled houses which we so much admire, and imitate so persistently, with diamond-paned windows here, there, and everywhere, except where you expect them, and corner fireplaces, and twisted staircases, were not built with the idea of being picturesque, but because that was the builder's idea of a comfortable house to live in.

Miss Whateley's house was redeemed from downright ugliness by the creepers that covered it; clematis,—the early, white one that comes in May, and the dark purple that makes such a lovely contrast with the tea-rose in July,—white jessamine, scarlet pyrus japonica, creamy Banksia roses, and all-pervading Virginia creeper, to which Miss Whateley sometimes threatened destruction, so pushing and interfering was it in its irrepressible growth, but was mollified every autumn by its splendid colours, when the other creepers were gone with the summer.

The garden was so entirely Miss Whateley's hobby that it will come to the fore when I am wishing to introduce that lady to the reader, and in every-day life it had the same way of intruding on attention at

inopportune moments, as, for example, when Miss Whateley was having family prayers,—if prayers can be called family when they are merely a duet between Miss Whateley and Maria, or Maria's predecessor or successor,—the thrushes always took the opportunity for a raid on the newly-planted sweet peas, specially incited thereto, she believed, by the devil, and distracted her attention so terribly that she sometimes debated whether it would not be more conducive to devotion to get up and hiss at them from the window, and return with a composed mind, than to hurry on, running one prayer into another, and jumping up before the last Amen was out of Maria's leisurely lips.

So, too, sometimes she had just raised her cup to her mouth, or had a morsel poised on her fork, when a weed or a snail caught her eye, and she had to set down fork or cup and go out to investigate, and when she got to the spot, very often one thing after another claimed her attention, and she altogether forgot that she had not finished her dinner or tea, or had left in the very midst of a paragraph in the newspaper, involving, perhaps, the fall of an empire, or some event of world-wide importance.

It even prevented her that day from opening a telegram brought to her in the afternoon, when, as is related at the beginning of this chapter, she was contemplating her geraniums, and debating with herself

about planting them out. I do not fancy she had ever had a telegram before in her life, but she was not as frightened as she otherwise would have been, for the draper at Kingham had lately sent round an advertising circular in orange-coloured envelopes of the same shade as telegraphic communications; so when Maria brought it in, Miss Whateley let it lie for some minutes before she opened it, picking off some withered leaves and altering the position of several pots, feeling that Messrs Jones and Smith's alarming sacrifices and extraordinary bargains did not demand immediate attention.

But when she opened it and read the contents, written in that hand peculiar to telegraph clerks, male and female, all over England, she sat staring at the pink paper helplessly, till Maria brought in the tea-tray, and never noticed that she had knocked over the watering-pot, and that a little stream was meandering over the carpet, and forming a piece of ornamental water against the hearthrug.

The words she kept saying over to herself, without grasping their meaning, were, 'Will you take care of the child for us? Come as early as possible and fetch her. Sybil, Brooke Street.'

To anyone unaccustomed to telegrams there is something terrifying in their very conciseness, even when they do not announce any alarming piece of news. They are something like the utterances of an oracle,

like a sentence of fate ; it would seem almost profane to make light of them, and presumption to act any way otherwise than they dictate. Miss Whateley would no more have thought of telegraphing back, 'Can't come' (indeed it never occurred to her to telegraph at all), than she would of protesting against the summons of the great angel of death, if he had suddenly stood in the doorway to call her away. And, besides this, it was not like a telegram from an intimate, with whom one has been in constant intercourse or correspondence, in which case there are all sorts of sympathetic cords that answer to each otherwise enigmatical word. This Sybil, Brooke Street, Miss Whateley had never heard from, and had only seen once, and the child whom she had been summoned to fetch she had only heard of through the columns of the *Morning Post* announcing its birth.

Tom Harrington she had known in old days very well, when his parents had taken the old Manor House at Colcroft for several summers. She had known him in perambulator days, when she had propitiated him timidly with biscuits ; in school-boy days, when he had appreciated bread and jam ; and later, when he came riding over in pink on his way to the Meet, with a young moustache, and such a gay, debonnaire manner as kept Miss Whateley at the garden gate till she caught a severe cold and rheumatism. And then she heard no more of her young hero for some years, and why should she ?

How could an old maid, living a pokey sort of life in a country village, expect to be remembered by Tom Harrington, with all his brilliant, bright life before him, full of interests of which she knew nothing ?

But he did remember her, all the same, and made his appearance one summer's day, now five years ago, and not alone this time, but with a sweet young wife by his side,—a bride of only six weeks' standing,—so lovely and gracious and unlike Miss Whateley's experience of ordinary girls, that she could do nothing but stare at her, and take off her spectacles and wipe them, and put them on again, and stare again, till she was quite ashamed of herself, and was sure Tom would think her very rude.

She did not mean any disparagement to the girls of Hayhurst. There was Annie Gibson, the doctor's daughter, and the two girls at the Vicarage, and several others of Miss Whateley's acquaintance, all of them nice girls, and pretty girls too, in their tennis frocks, and with a nice colour in their cheeks, and eyes bright with exercise and life ; but this was something different,—as different as the Dresden cup, which Miss Whateley kept, with care approaching to reverence, in the glass cupboard, where no one could possibly see it, was different from the cup brought in every day for Miss Whateley's tea,—a pretty cup enough, with a blue edge and pink roses on it, but different.

Miss Whateley had such a sensitive, little, old-

fashioned heart, that anything extra pretty or sweet or kind brought tears into her silly old eyes,—a half-opened rose, or Maria remembering to put her slippers to warm when she had been for a wet walk, or an infant-school child opening a fat hand and bestowing a damp, sticky peppermint-drop on her, brought on fearful attacks of sniffing and desperate searchings after the pocket-handkerchief in the pocket which, on emergencies, was always hopelessly out of reach.

And so the sight of Sybil Harrington made Miss Whateley's glasses very dim. But Tom Harrington was not a bit offended. 'He was always so good-natured,' she said, and, indeed, a bear could hardly have resented the innocent, irrepressible, sincere admiration in her face; and I think it was the memory of that look that caused that telegram to find its way to Hayhurst that May afternoon.

They had stopped an hour and drunk tea with Miss Whateley. She always spoke of drinking tea, though her mother would have called it 'taking a dish of tea,' but that, Miss Whateley knew, was antiquated and out of date. She had got out the best china for the occasion, and Sybil had had that Dresden cup of which mention has been made, and which had not been drunk out of within the memory of mortal man. She made some excuse to leave them while she superintended these preparations, and the honeymoon was too recent to make

any excuses necessary for leaving them to a tête-à-tête, and then she tried to steal round unobserved to the little strawberry bed, stooping nearly double as she passed under the parlour window, but was detected in the act, and joined by the two guests, who insisted that there was nothing they liked better than picking strawberries; and Tom even followed her into the kitchen, and took the toasting-fork by main force out of her hand, declaring he always made the toast when he came to tea with her as a boy, which she could not recall.

It was altogether such a merry tea. Miss Whateley did not know when she had laughed so much, and it threw a brightness over many a dull day, and she would conjure up the image of Sybil in her dainty cambric dress picking strawberries, and Tom sitting on the green, three-legged stool in front of the kitchen fire wielding the toasting-fork, or both of them sitting on the big chintz-covered sofa that took up nearly one side of the parlour, with Tom giving a description of an imaginary quarrel between them, and Sybil stopping his laughing mouth with her little hand.

That was five years ago now, but Miss Whateley remembered every incident distinctly. Since then she had heard nothing more of them, except that the following Christmas brought a cod and a barrel of oysters,—an overwhelming present, which gave Miss

Whateley two sleepless nights, for Maria 'couldn't abear' fish, and she herself had the appetite of—a robin, I was going to say, only I believe they are the most voracious birds in creation. As to the oysters, I doubt if she had ever tasted one, and was quite unequal to opening them, so she felt very uncomfortable and anxious, till she came to the conclusion that dear Tom and Sybil would not be vexed if she passed on their splendid present to the Vicarage, where there were eight healthy appetites, as well as the vicar and his wife, and where oysters were a lovely memory of college days, rising now and then before the vicar's mind as he carved the family cold mutton.

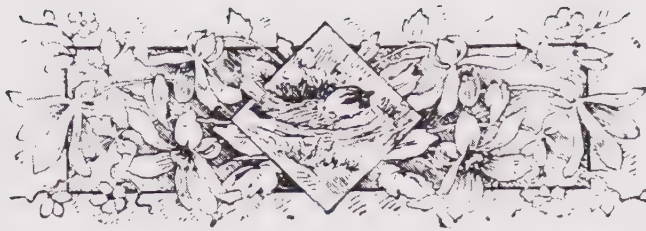
'And when you are having it, perhaps you would send me a little help, just that I may say I have tasted it,' Miss Whateley said, rather apologetically, feeling as if it were mean to ask even a crumb of a present back again.

'Oh, of course, of course, Miss Whateley! Don shall run round with a bit and some oyster sauce. Eh? don't care for oysters? Well, I'm not sure it's not a pity to put them in sauce.'

But I am sorry to say, and the vicar felt the deepest remorse for many a cold-mutton day afterwards, that when Spillicans, the Vicarage cat, was choking over the fish bones, and when the vicar was raising the last oyster to his lips at supper, after the children had gone to

bed,—a supper blissfully recalling old college days, with bottled stout all complete,—they suddenly remembered that Miss Whateley's little helping had been entirely forgotten. He had a terrible attack of indigestion next day, but whether it was caused by remorse, or oysters, or bottled stout, I cannot undertake to say.

Then nothing further was heard of the young Harringtons, except the announcement of the birth of a baby, and Miss Whateley, having no personal experience of new-born babies, imagined a cherubic little being, with its father's eyes and its mother's rose-leaf complexion, and fancied it clapping its little hands and da-daing within a few days of its birth. To be sure, she had seen terrible little red objects in cottages, but she would no more have thought of associating that sweet girl-bride with such painful little appearances than she would with Spillicans' blind, bullet-headed, greasy-looking tabby kittens. Four years had elapsed since then, and now came this telegram,—‘Will you take care of the child for us? Come as early as possible and fetch her. Sybil, Brook Street.’



CHAPTER III.

THE CHILD.

And when I ask with throbs of pain,
'Ah! when shall they all meet again?'
As in the days long since gone by,
The ancient timepiece makes reply,
For ever—never! never—for ever!

LONGFELLOW.



MISS WHATELEY'S visits to London might have been counted on the fingers of one hand, and railway travelling at any time was an agitating business, so when, at about half-past eleven, she reached 70 Brooke Street, she was already in such a state of bewilderment that the most astonishing and unexpected circumstances could hardly have added to it.

So she was not at all surprised to see the red and white awning still fluttering across the pavement, or a group of men at the door, one of them a policeman, who roughly asked her her business. Indeed, I think civility would have been more astonishing to her by that time, for, during her three hours' journey to London, and two

changes, she had received scant courtesy from the porters, who seemed exceedingly annoyed if she asked questions, and still more irate if she made any mistakes owing to not asking directions. But, of course, she was very stupid and fidgety, and did not even realise that an up-train was not likely suddenly to turn round and go back again, so the porters' impatience was so far excusable.

She was a little out of breath, too, for a hansom had come along the street so fast that she felt that another might be down on her at any moment, and she had run across the road with an agility she had not given herself credit for; and policemen—even the local policeman, Joe Barnes, whom she had known in pinafore days—were always awe-inspiring, and calculated to produce palpitation.

So, in answer to his question, she only handed him the telegram, which had grown very crumpled and limp by this time, through being presented to the guard every time he asked for her ticket, and returned angrily, and stored away in some patent inside-pocket, out of which it was rummaged with much difficulty at the next demand for tickets.

The policeman read the telegram with interest, and handed it to another man who stood at the foot of the staircase, and they smoothed it out and pored over it till Miss Whateley had recovered her

breath, and asked timidly, 'Is Mrs Harrington at home?'

The men turned and stared at her, and another, standing by, laughed a loud, incredulous guffaw, and winked knowingly at the others.

'No, she don't happen to be at home just this minute, mum. She's just stepped out, but if you likes to sit down and wait till kingdom-come, she's safe to be back by then.'

'Shut up,' the other said, for there was no looking at Miss Whateley's face and suspecting her of anything but the most perfect sincerity.

'You 'd heard what was likely to come off here before you had the telegram, I take it, ma'am?'

The look of bewilderment on her face was almost sufficient answer in the negative, and the man opened the door of the dining-room, and, with more civility, bid her step in and take a seat.

It was still littered with the remains of last night's supper: a regiment of empty champagne bottles stood in the corner, and rout seats, piled on one another, barricaded the way.

'Now you just tell me what you know about this. Take your time, ma'am, there ain't nothing to be frightened at. What did Mrs Harrington tell you about this sudden journey of hers?'

'Journey? Mrs Harrington? Why, I thought she

was here, and wanted me to fetch the child away because of illness or something.'

'When was the last time you heard from her?'

'I haven't ever heard from her. But——'

'Well?'

'I have from him, more than once,' with a little flutter of pride even through the bewilderment.

'Now we're coming to it!' thought the man. 'And when did you hear from him last?'

Miss Whateley stopped to reflect. 'Let me see, it was—yes—no—I'm sure it was in April, for there was a bud on the tea-rose the very day the letter came.'

'Oh! more than a month ago this business was arranged?'

'Four years ago last April. Yes, I am quite sure it was then he wrote. I have the letter at home, and you could see the date.'

'Then you didn't know they were going off?'

'Going off?'

'Yes, it was as clever a job as ever I've come across, and I've seen a good many in my time. A big ball last night with all the rank and fashion, and Madame goes off as one of the guests, all cloaks and furs, so that no one could recognise her. And an hour after he followed, shaved off his moustache, and got up as a pastry-cook's man. He was always good at private theatricals and such like, and it was the best bit of acting he ever

did in his life, for there had been a whisper that something was up, and one of our best men was put on to watch, and met him face to face as he came out of the house and let him pass. He's fit to hang himself, he is in such a rage at being done.'

The man, sharp as he was, was not sharp enough to see how enigmatical most of what he said was to Miss Whateley. There is nothing so baffling to wisdom as ignorance.

'But the child,' she said. 'I was to fetch the child.'

'Oh, she's up in the nursery, right enough, and the sooner you take her off the better. Those servants don't care a bit what becomes of her. They're so sick at not getting their wages, or any of the pickings they think they've a right to. It is hard lines on them and no mistake, but still I fancy they've feathered their nest pretty well, and had a jolly good time of it. There won't be no objections to your taking the child and a few of its things. And look here, if you'll go and see after it, I'll have a cab fetched. We'll just take your name and address, and if you have any communication from the gentleman perhaps you'll let us know. They'll be anxious to know how the child is, so they're bound to write.'

'I hope they may,' Miss Whateley said, in all innocence.

And the man replied, with a laugh, ‘ You can’t hope it more than we do, ma’am.’

Miss Whateley then proceeded up-stairs to the nursery, passing on the way an elegant but excited female, in an almost hysterical condition, outside her mistress’s room, at the door of which a stolid policeman with folded arms received entreaties, threats and remonstrances with the same wooden imperturbability.

If Mrs Vestris had had the slightest hint of what was likely to happen, it would have been a matter of fifty pounds in her pocket, instead of which there were in that locked room ever so many things that she considered virtually belonged to her,—dresses that Mrs Harrington, in the ordinary course of affairs, would not have worn again; bonnets and mantles that would never have been asked for if their places in Mrs Harrington’s wardrobe had known them no more; laces, gloves, and pretty knick-knacks that Mrs Vestris had only left in her mistress’s drawers till a convenient opportunity occurred of sorting them out.

It really was too aggravating, and blotted out at once and for ever all Mrs Harrington’s former generosity, which had been almost lavish, all the kindness and consideration which is not so common between mistress and maid even as lavish generosity, all the gentleness and sweetness and courtesy which had been shown in the past. According to Mrs Vestris, from that time forward,

Mrs Harrington's beauty was of the most artificial and deceptive character, all paint and powder and dyes, and her figure all padding and dressmaking. Her morals, too, were such that Mrs Vestris had made up her virtuous mind that she could not remain in the service of such a character, and she had firmly resolved to give notice the very day after the ball.

Up in the nursery Sybil was all alone, sitting a little forlornly on the hearthrug with Rosalind clasped in her arms. She did not in the least realise what had happened, though she was conscious that something had affected Jessie in a peculiar manner. First of all, the difference had been agreeable ; dressing, which was generally a prolonged and tiresome business, was delightfully shortened. Jessie dispensed altogether with the bath, and contented herself with the application of a damp sponge to Sybil's face and hands. There was no wearisome parting and combing curly hair in various directions, and Jessie was called away in the middle of putting on the child's shoes and socks, and forgot to finish the transaction, so that, when Miss Whateley arrived, there was still one little, bare, pink foot in evidence.

Breakfast had been somewhat delayed, but bread and milk ultimately appeared, and was eaten without the usual formalities of pinafore and constant injunctions to sit up and hold the spoon properly, and not spill the

milk down the front of her frock. These were advantages, but as the morning went on, and the nursery fire went out, and strange men came and looked into the nursery and went away again, an odd little feeling of desolation crept over the child, and she began suddenly to cry, and as suddenly stopped, and sat with big, round eyes full of tears fixed on the black grate, pondering what the words meant, 'Now then, hold your noise this minute!' in a very sharp accent from Jessie's lips.

It had been such a very sheltered little life for these first four years that the first blast of cold wind was almost more puzzling than it was painful, and she was still reflecting on the matter, with tears on her eyelashes, when Miss Whateley came in, looking down at her with such kind eyes, through dim spectacles, that Sybil at once handed her a cup of make-believe tea from the little tea-things, and showed her a crack on one of Rosalind's thumbs.

Children have wonderful penetration,—almost as unerring as dogs,—and discriminate between real and sham almost at the first glance. I think at that very first interview Sybil assumed that regal supremacy that she exercised over Miss Whateley for the rest of their acquaintance,—terms which were very agreeable to the old lady, who was inclined to be shy with children, and could not readily assume the superior, motherly manner

with them that comes natural to many old maids and is wanting in as many parents.

So it was a great relief when Sybil took the initiative, and proposed that Miss Whateley should put on the missing sock and shoe, and directed her where to find them, under the cot in the night nursery. While this was being done in a somewhat fumbling, nervous manner by Miss Whateley, Jessie came in, and finding that someone had come to fetch Sybil, felt relieved of all responsibility, and went off to pack her own boxes.

Sybil received the intelligence that she was going home with Miss Whateley, to be her little girl till Daddy wanted her, with great approval, and showed the drawer where her smart little hat and coat were kept, and instructed Miss Whateley, with peals of laughter, how to button her out-of-door boots, and they were just marching off, hand in hand, out of the nursery, when Sybil remembered that she could not leave Rosalind behind, and Miss Whateley that she ought to take a few of the child's clothes.

In the wardrobe in the night nursery were all sorts of dainty little garments of incredible shortness, with as much lace and embroidery, and tucks and elaborate needlework, as could be compressed into so small a space. Miss Whateley was fairly puzzled what to take, and Sybil's advice all ran to outside adornment, such as 'Sybil's new sass,' or 'my Parky frock,' but at last the

decision was hastened by the appearance of a man to announce that the cab was waiting, so Miss Whateley made a rapid selection, and rolled them up in an untidy bundle, contrary to every principle of her neat, old-maidish mind, and then Sybil gaily led the way downstairs, with Miss Whateley's hand in hers, never giving a regretful glance at the pretty nursery she was leaving, with the gay pictures and doll's house and the rocking-horse, or a thought to the closed door of mother's room, where the policeman still stood on guard, so anxious was she to induce Miss Whateley to jump off the two bottom steps of each flight, which was an accomplishment she had lately learnt herself, and which she was naturally anxious to impart to others.

She was anxious, too, to display her other accomplishment to Miss Whateley, for, perhaps, a person who could not jump off two steps might also be unable to say her A, B, C, so at the Paddington Station she drew up before a large newspaper poster to point out such letters as she knew, and it was not for a minute that Miss Whateley realised that the words from which the child was picking out the letters were 'Great Failure in the City. Messrs Scott and Harrington. Absconding of Managing Partner. Warrant for his arrest.'

Such a nice lot of big, black A's for Sybil to pick out, till Miss Whateley drew her unwillingly away.

She was asleep when the fly pulled up in front of Miss

Whateley's garden gate, and that lady would not give her over into Maria's arms, though her own were very weary and aching, but carried her herself up the path, and into the kitchen, where there was a little bit of fire, and a kettle singing on it, and which looked more cosy than the parlour with its dim-burning paraffin lamp, and Miss Whateley's frugal supper spread at one end of the table.

The child just roused up to take some bread and milk.

'There ain't a drop left for your tea, mum.'

'Oh, never mind, Maria, I'd just as soon have it without.'

And then they undressed her by the kitchen fire, and luckily Maria had little brothers and sisters, and knew the construction of young garments, and also that in that beautiful sleep of childhood you may turn and twist them, and do what you like with them, without waking them.

And then the alarming discovery was made that among the things in the bundle no night-gown had been included, so one of Miss Whateley's had to be adapted to the purpose, with much turning up of long sleeves and repression of frills which rose up and tried to engulf the little curly head that slept quite as soundly and sweetly as if her costume had been quite becoming and elegant.

This was more than could be said for Miss Whateley, who was overtired and excited, and also thought it necessary to lie at the very extreme edge of the bed, and keep rigidly still for fear any movement should disturb the little, warm, softly-breathing form in the middle of the bed, wrapped in that most exquisite thing, childhood's sleep.





CHAPTER IV.

AFTER THE STORM.

Fresh as the first beam glittering on a sail
That brings our friends up from the under-world ;
Sad as the last that reddens over one
That sinks with all we love below the verge :
So sad, so fresh, the days that are no more.

TENNYSON.



HAVE said that the memory of Miss Whateley's simple, undisguised admiration had led to the dispatch of that telegram bidding her come and fetch the child. When the dark clouds began to gather round the house of Messrs Scott and Harrington, and Tom had to tell his wife that the crash might come at any time, bringing with it not only ruin but disgrace, his first idea had been that she and the child should go back to her family and he would go forth into exile alone.

Many hard things were said of Tom Harrington in after days, and no doubt many of them were just, for easy-going carelessness in business is very culpable,

and thoughtless extravagance may be reckoned as dishonesty, and a big failure means ruin to many people as well as the principal actors, but I know that the stories people told of his having feathered his nest and carried off a goodly pile were utterly untrue, as also his living in splendour and luxury in Brazil while many were starving through his fault. That life in Brazil was not very long for either of them, though it was long before the fact was known in England that Sybil Harrington drooped and died within a few weeks of their landing, and that her loss so crushed her husband that he never picked up hope or heart again, and mercifully was allowed to follow her before the year was out.

His wife believed in him through all the trouble, and when he told her how he must leave her and the child, perhaps never to meet again this side of the grave, but that he could bear it if he knew she was safe and well among her own people, she just put her arms round his neck, and said, Nonsense, that wherever he went she should go too.

At first they planned to take the child too, but when the clouds began to hurry up, and the grumblings of the coming storm sounded every day more ominously near, it became evident that the child's presence would seriously complicate their plans, and, with much reluctance, they resolved to leave her with some one till matters had blown over to some extent and they could

send for her. But the question was, With whom could they leave her? There were plenty of fair-weather friends who had made much of the pretty child, lady friends who had kissed and fondled her, men who had brought bouillons to propitiate her, or perhaps her mother through her. There were country houses where she had been welcomed and reigned as a little queen,—one especially, where they had spent the Christmas before, where there was a large family of pleasant, good-natured, country boys and girls who made much of her and petted her, though her pretty, only-child airs and graces made them look very rough and countrified in comparison. But Mrs Harrington, with a mother's instinct, felt that this was not likely to last very long when the child, who showed them off to such disadvantage, was dependent on their charity, and had clouds of shame and disgrace hanging about her poor young head.

There was an aunt, piously inclined, who had mourned over dear Sybil's worldliness, though she had taken advantage of it sometimes for the benefit of her dowdy, hopelessly-unmarriageable daughters. Poor little Syb! Daddy's own little girl! How would she fare with Aunt Rachel when events had so befallen as to point the moral more satisfactorily than morals are often pointed in ordinary life, when the ungodly were no longer in prosperity, when they had come to the fearful end patent to the eyes of all men, at which the cruel

finger could be pointed. Oh dear! to think of all the pretty children's parties, the kisses, the bonbons, the compliments! and not to be able to find one warm little nursery corner where bread and milk and a clean pinafore could be counted on, or room under a tender, motherly wing for a little bird out of a nest torn to pieces in a storm. And so, when Tom Harrington suggested that kind old Miss Whateley, it approved itself at once to the mother's heart, though, as we have seen, four years lay between them and that sunny July day when two happy, thoughtless, young people picked strawberries or toasted bread, and Miss Whateley looked with such beaming, wondering admiration at the young bride.

It was only a suggestion at first at which they both smiled, but by degrees it became a familiar idea, and when at last the storm broke suddenly, the telegram was despatched, and they hardly realised how utterly unprepared Miss Whateley was, and what a convulsion it was likely to cause in her quiet, monotonous existence; and it was only in the days to come that they became conscious of all the risks and hideous possibilities that might have ensued from their rash and ill-considered action.

They had plenty of time for such reflections during that long, dreary voyage, when the excitement of escape was over, when there was no longer the interest of baffling pursuit and outwitting their pursuers, when

there was nothing to be done but eat out their hearts in idleness, going back over all that might have been, going forward into that drearily empty future in which there seemed nothing to hope or wish for,—as monotonous a prospect as the great, blue sea all round and the great, blue sky above.

Tom Harrington sometimes felt as if he should go mad with that eternal blue sea and the sound of the screw turning, turning in his brain, and Sybil would go back with a sick longing for her baby, marvelling how she could ever have let her out of her arms, how she could have spent whole days away from her, how many bedtimes and lovely bathings she had left to nurses, how she had rung the nursery bell when the little one grew tired, and did not catch her up in those arms that felt so empty now, and soothe her against the breast that ached for the pressure of that little head.

And she would vary these yearnings by misgivings for the present and the future. What if Miss Whateley were ill or dead? or memory had exaggerated the simple goodness in her face, and she were cross and fidgety, as old maids usually bear the character of being?

I think it was one of Tom Harrington's severest punishments to see the hungry, mother's look in his wife's face and to hear her moan out the little one's name in her restless, troubled sleep.

If only they could have seen little Sybil just for a

moment; if she could have kissed a fat hand to them across the waste of waters, or waved one of Miss Whateley's roses out of the beautiful English June; if the screw would have stopped for a minute, so that they could hear, through the great quiet of the tropical night, the fresh, little voice saying her prayers at Miss Whateley's knee and asking God to bless father and mother, and make Sybby a good girl. Perhaps, if that great silence might have fallen on earth's troubled noises,—that silence which we know lies always between a praying child and the throne of God,—it might have set their fears at rest to have heard Auntie's name come after theirs, which they might easily have guessed meant Miss Whateley. But they might have been puzzled at the addition of the name 'Don,' a few days later, sometimes with an adjective added—'dear Don' or 'poor Don' or 'funny Don,'—variations in the form of prayer that somewhat troubled Miss Whateley's orthodox mind, especially the word 'funny,' which she was grievously afraid was profane.

So also Miss Whateley could not quite approve of Rosalind being, with much difficulty, placed in a kneeling position; she could not close her eyes, as Sybil did, without assuming a prostrate position, which neither Sybil nor Miss Whateley knew was a very usual attitude of prayer among Orientals; and she altogether protested against the pulling of the mysterious strings

on these occasions, though she relented when tears came into the child's eyes, and the baby-lips puckered; but it was a great relief to her sensitive conscience when these constantly-manipulated strings gave way finally, and the doll was reduced to entire and reverent silence.

Mr and Mrs Harrington might have wondered who the Don was for whom Sybil asked a blessing, and might have thought, from the name, that it was a dog, —the name being certainly suggestive of a retriever or Newfoundland, and Sybil's prayers not being always confined to the welfare of humanity, but making sudden little excursions into the animal kingdom when anything there struck her as being particularly endearing. But Don, in this case, was the short for Donald, and Donald was the youngest son of the vicar of Hayhurst, Mr Grant. There was a certain sort of appropriateness in the dog-like name, for there was a sort of dog-like look about the boy, a clumsiness suggestive of a young Newfoundland, and a look of dumb, patient affection in his brown eyes that you may see in many a dog's face as it looks up at a brute of a master utterly unworthy to inspire such a beautiful feeling.

For the rest, he was brown-skinned and rough-haired, very often ragged at knees and elbows, not unfrequently dirty as to hands and crumpled as to collar. He was just fourteen when he first made his way into little Sybil's prayers, being at that hopeless, impossible age

for a boy when endurance is the sentiment towards him most to be cultivated, and you must try and remember the dear, little baby-child he was not so many years ago, and hopefully anticipate the pleasant, manly youth that will most likely emerge from the uncomfortable chrysalis of the boy.

His family had got to treat him as an unpleasant absurdity, and exclaim at him constantly, 'Oh, Don, what *are* you doing?' with a sort of martyred, long-suffering surprise, more or less good-natured, according to the temper prevailing at the moment.

The difficulties of his age were complicated by an inconvenient love of nature in its less presentable and conventional forms—efts and slow-worms and field-mice, beetles and large hairy caterpillars and frogs—and at one time he had a large collection of wood-lice in their plate armour of wonderful construction, and with the power of rolling themselves up into tight, little, grey balls, which is more than other men in armour can do on an emergency.

He was the youngest of his family, and separated by several years from his next sister, and, of course, at eighteen she was a grown-up young lady, in love with the curate in the next parish, and had nothing whatever in common with poor Don and his dirty hands and caterpillars.

And as he was the youngest, and all the vicar's

energies, which were never very great, had been exhausted on the education of the elder members of the family, he came off rather badly in this respect. First of all, they treated him as a baby, as is often the way with the youngest of a family, and thought there was plenty of time before him for learning. Then came some sudden and disgraceful manifestation of ignorance and backwardness compared to some other boy of the same age, and his sisters took him in hand and made spasmodic efforts, one and then the other, to drum some knowledge into his head, instruction of a very intermittent nature, and apt to be interrupted and set aside for any other occupation,—dressmaking, or tennis, or skating.

Then another disgraceful exhibition of ignorance, and when Don was ignorant, which was generally, he always blurted it out most inconveniently, and had not the gift many children possess of keeping the best side outwards. This time the vicar himself undertook his education, though his classics were decidedly rusty, and he had an overpowering tendency to go to sleep when he sat up in the study with Don's slate-pencil squeaking laboriously on his slate.

Mrs Grant had dark suspicions as to what took place during those quiet mornings when silence reigned in the study, from whence Mr Grant emerged when the dinner-bell rang, with a dewy, refreshed look in his eyes and a rosy colour in his cheeks which was not gener-

ally produced by arithmetic or construing. But Don kept his counsel loyally, being quite satisfied with the arrangement, being always provided with a tattered book on natural history, or a box containing living specimens of the same, which appeared directly his father's head began to nod and his breathing became regular and audible.

It was an unacknowledged compact between father and son that, if nothing was said about the naps, no notice should be taken of the small amount of work accomplished.

From time to time, proposals were made to send Don to school, but the poor vicar used to wonder how he ever was able to afford to pay the school bills when Harry and George went, and even screw out a modicum as well for a daily governess for the girls. Every year now seemed to make it more difficult to make two ends meet, though Harry and George were both off his hands, and Lizzie had a situation as companion to an old lady. To be sure, the glebe was unlet, which made a considerable difference in the income, and the calls on his purse from the parish seemed to increase in proportion as there was less in that purse to meet them.

So Don must do the best he can as to education, and Don was quite contented with what he got, not having the smallest ambition to be a scholar, or ashamed of being behind boys of his age.



CHAPTER V.

SYBIL'S FRIEND.

She was a Phantom of delight
When first she gleamed upon my sight ;
A lovely Apparition sent
To be a moment's ornament.

WORDSWORTH.



CHILDREN are wonderfully adaptable. Most children will bear transplanting into entirely new circumstances without turning a hair, whereas an older person would be shattered and unsettled for months, and perhaps never be quite the same again. If the Lord of Burleigh's wife could have been, say, fifteen years younger, she would have taken to all the state and bounty of Burleigh House by Stamford Town like a duck to the water, and would not have felt the least oppressed by the burthen of an honour unto which she was not born, and if the position had been reversed, she would have thought it the best fun in the world to give up 'the homes for lord and lady, built for pleasure and

for state,' and live in the cottage of a landscape painter, which is likely to be pretty muddling, I take it.

The child had this much in her favour, that she came into a beautiful May country of sunshine and cowslips and singing birds, compared to which the loveliest London nursery is a dreary, dull prison. The east wind, that had been so bitter and keen on the night of Mrs Harrington's ball, slipped gently round into the west the very next day, and the rain, that was falling when Miss Whateley carried the sleeping child into the house, had cleared off next morning, and left everything sweet and green and fragrant and glistening in the bright sunshine.

Sybil had had such a happy, little life, and happiness is so good for children, till it makes them selfish, and it is the parents' fault when it does this, and it is the cruellest thing they can do to allow it, and I think the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children ought to interfere to prevent that idiotic spoiling that ends by making a child detestable to other people and a burden and unhappiness to himself.

But I think Sybil would have stood more spoiling than most, having so sweet and wholesome a little nature, and with a sort of inbred generosity and sense of honour that prevented her from taking advantage of Miss Whateley, and which led her to expound to that lady various laws of the Medes and Persians that had

prevailed under Jessie's rule in the nursery at home, some of which appeared rather arbitrary and pointless as detached rules of conduct, without any explanation of the doubtless sound reasons which had led to their imposition.

Miss Whateley was quite distressed the first time Sybil put herself in the corner. The child had helped herself to a lump of sugar out of the basin while Miss Whateley was looking for her spectacles, and had popped it so quickly into the middle of her bread and milk that detection would have been impossible.

But when the old lady beamed approval on the child, who had become supernaturally quiet after committing this successful larceny, Sybil's face began to pucker and work in an alarming manner, and she pushed her chair away from the table, and climbed down from the height of the cushion and Johnson's dictionary, which were used to bring her to a proper level with her plate, and marched off into the corner between the sofa and the window, where the watering-pot was kept, and stood there sobbing out that she was a naughty girl, and auntie did not love her one bit. She would not let Miss Whateley come near to comfort her, or come out of her voluntary captivity till breakfast was cleared away, and Miss Whateley had, with a sadly-distracted mind, done her small housekeeping duties, and then a cheerful little voice from the corner announced that

Sybil was good now, and would never, never, never be such a naughty girl again, and there was such a dear, little, funny spider in the watering-pot.

Miss Whateley was sadly afraid, after this, that the child was too good to live, and was hardly to be persuaded out of such gloomy prognostications by one or two very healthy attacks of tantrums, which ought to have reassured her.

It was one of these attacks of tantrums that brought her in contact with Don for the first time. It was a few days after her arrival, and Miss Whateley had taken her out to pick cowslips, and had been tempted on by the loveliness of the day, and the budding beauty all round, to go further than she intended; and when the tea-time feeling began to make itself felt, they were both tired and a considerable distance from home. And then Sybil stung one of her fat legs with a stinging nettle, and Miss Whateley objected to her sitting down to examine into the subject, in case the grass might be damp, and memories came back keenly to Sybil's mind of her perambulator, from which she used to survey the fashionable world in the Park, safe from dogs, or fatigue, or nettles, if such things are to be found in London.

And then she began to cry, and Miss Whateley tried to carry her, and the cowslips were spilt out of the basket in a limp, fragrant heap on the ground, and then,

I am afraid, Sybil's crying reached that particular point at which tantrums begin. And it was just then that Don appeared, coming struggling through the hedge and splashing across a ditch with that reckless disregard of clothing that makes boys such a care to their mothers. And though he took not the slightest thought for his raiment, or of the little rectangular tears therein with which Mrs Grant and her needle were so familiar, he was as tender as possible over the bottle-tit's nest he held in his hand, which sustained no hurt in his scrambling, cross-country progress.

'Hullo!' he said, 'what's up?'

And Sybil stopped crying, looking curiously with tearful eyes at this muddy, brown-faced boy.

'She's tired, Don,' said Miss Whateley, taking up the cudgels at once, for fear anyone should venture to insinuate that Sybil was naughty. 'She's such a good little girl, she never cries, only we've come too far. It's all my fault; I ought to have remembered. Oh dear! oh dear!'

Miss Whateley was not far from tears herself, awful memories of stories she had heard of over-tired children crowding on her remorseful mind.

'I'll carry her. Come on,' said Don.

He would not trust Miss Whateley to carry the tit's nest; there was not another to be found, that Don knew of, within three miles, and he had quite as great a

distrust of other people meddling with his treasures as the rest of the world had of him with theirs, so he found a snug hole in a tree to stow it away, put back the cowslips in the basket, and, before Miss Whateley could expostulate, had Sybil pickaback, much to that young lady's delight, and was off on the homeward way, galloping and curvetting like the most active and spirited horse, shying and kicking and jumping and dancing about, to the terror of Miss Whateley, and to the great satisfaction of Sybil, who clasped her fat arms round his neck, and shrieked with ecstasy at every fresh demonstration of her very lively charger.

Miss Whateley came panting behind, forgetting her own fatigue in her very mixed feelings of pleasure at the shrill peals of childish laughter that came back to her, and an uneasy sensation that she ought to catch Don and suggest that Sybil should be carried in a manner more befitting a young lady.

But she was too out of breath, and soon too far behind, to remonstrate, and when she reached home, Don had deposited his rider, and was just going off, rather hot and red in the face from his exertions.

‘He won’t stop to tea, auntie, and his name’s Don, and he’s going to give me a dear, little, live squizzel all for my very own.’

But Miss Whateley, though too breathless to speak,

was too grateful to allow him to go off in this way, and she caught hold of Don's arm and pulled him into the house with her, and, more by signs than sounds, signified to Maria to get a pot of raspberry jam out of the cupboard, and Don allowed himself to be persuaded, nothing loath.

And from that day forward Don and Sybil were friends, and though, I am bound to say, Don took Sybil into a good deal of mischief, and was frequently the cause of wet socks and torn frock and broken knees, which afflicted Miss Whateley greatly, he took a great deal of trouble and anxiety off that lady's mind by keeping the child happy and amused, making the fresh little laughter ring out, and the sweet young face brighten and dimple with smiles, and kept off the gravity which is apt to settle on a child living entirely with grown-up people.

It relieved Miss Whateley, too, of the necessity of playing with Sybil games requiring hopping, or creeping about on hands and knees, or dressing up with an antimacassar over her head, which Miss Whateley found very trying to limbs and back, and embarrassing if anyone came in unexpectedly and saw her in such undignified circumstances.

But Don was more than equal to the occasion, and after playing with him, Sybil found Miss Whateley's performances so unsatisfactory that she was glad to be

read to, or learn cross-stitch, which was much more in Miss Whateley's line.

And if Don was a godsend to Sybil and Miss Whateley, the child was quite as much so to him, for, as we have seen, he was very much one by himself, and being treated as a bore and a nuisance by his family, was getting rough and uncivilised, and wrapped up in his own small interests, which grew less and less to include other people and more and more to be absorbed in the rest of creation.

But Sybil found her way straight to Don's heart, and stayed there. He thought her so marvellously pretty, to begin with, and he would sit sometimes with his knees hugged up to his chin, in one of those ungainly attitudes his sisters so inveighed against, and watch her as he might a kitten at play, or a pigeon in the sunshine, or a humming-bird moth hovering over a flower. I expect it was his love of nature that made him appreciate her prettiness, for most boys would not notice what a child was like; indeed, I think few boys of fourteen would have troubled themselves about a little girl of five at all, except to tease her a bit now and then, and would not have dreamt of devoting hours to her amusement, playing baby-games, and, as they would have called it, doing nursemaid, and giving up all that most boys think are the things that make life worth

living,—cricket above all, which, however, had no interest at all to Don.

‘Just like his stupid, unsociable ways,’ his sisters said, ‘when it might bring him in with other nice boys, and make a reason for us going to the cricket matches. I’ve no patience with him!’





CHAPTER VI.

MRS HARRINGTON JONES.

Dainty little maiden, whither would ye wander ?
'Far and far away,' said the dainty little maiden,
'All among the meadows, the clover and the clematis,
Daisies and kingcups and honeysuckle flowers.'

TENNYSON.



IN the small circle of Miss Whateley's acquaintance, the sudden appearance of Sybil at first caused much remark, and advice was freely offered to her as to what she ought to do in the circumstances. The general opinion was that she ought not to keep the child, and Mrs Grant waxed quite eloquent on the wickedness of undertaking such a charge, 'when you know, Miss Whateley, how small your means are, not to speak of your entire want of experience in the management of children.'

She spoke with great severity of Sybil's parents, alluding to them as 'that Harrington man and his

wretched wife'; while Miss Whateley sat meekly, with nervous hands folding and unfolding on her lap, and shaking her head occasionally in deprecation either of the hard words or of the evil-doing they denounced.

She herself had a very vague idea of what had really happened, and I do not think Mrs Grant knew much more accurately, though, to be sure, she did see a daily paper two days after issue, and Miss Whateley only occasionally borrowed the weekly local paper from the Green Man, adorned with rings where mugs of beer had been set down on it, and soft and frayed at the folds from constant turning.

So Mrs Grant was quite safe in haranguing upon the merits of the case, safe from all fear of contradiction from Miss Whateley, who, when she heard such words as 'swindler,' and 'unnatural parents,' thought wonderingly of Tom Harrington's bright, honest, open face, and of little Sybil's loving talk of Daddy, which seemed to contradict both of the accusations.

Mrs Grant urged upon Miss Whateley that it was simply encouraging that sort of people by keeping the child, that Miss Whateley's relationship to 'that Harrington man' was of the most remote degree, and that, if his nearer relations or his wretched wife's declined to take the child,—and, no doubt, they were only too glad to wash their hands of the whole business,—it ought to be sent to the workhouse, as a warning to

others, and not anything more than was right and proper! seeing that, by her father's means, many had been reduced to pauperism.

And just at this juncture Sybil came in, and, as ill-luck would have it, in one of her best pinafores that she had brought from London. Miss Whateley could not help wishing she had been wearing one of the lavender print pinafores which she and Maria had hastily made up to supplement the short and smart supply, and which were plain enough, in all conscience. But this pinafore was of clear muslin, elaborately tucked and trimmed with deep lace, not at all suited to be worn in Don's society, or by a child who, by just right, ought to be in the workhouse, and Maria had just brushed out her curls, and her bright, little head shone out in the sunbeam that came in through the open door with her, as though the two had been playing together and could not be separated.

She had such pretty, gracious, little manners, and whereas Mrs Grant's children at that age would have put their fingers in their mouths and shuffled their feet about, and refused to answer whatever blandishments might be expended on them, Sybil came smiling in with a sort of royal, almost patronising, air, and extended a fat hand and turned up a rosy, little mouth to be kissed, and told her she had been giving Rosalind her lessons, and then, somewhat repelled by Mrs Grant's severely-

disapproving aspect, she retreated to Miss Whateley, climbing on her lap as if that had been her resting-place for many a long day, and was likely to remain so in spite of the clear finger of duty pointing to the workhouse.

‘A pinafore trimmed with lace *that* deep,’ Mrs Grant described it indignantly afterwards. ‘Five shillings a yard if it was a penny; just the sort to make an evening cap with. A pinafore that would be soiled in five minutes and take a good hour to get up properly. I call it downright sinful! But I told Miss Whateley plainly what I thought about her keeping the child, so if she persists in doing so, and gets into difficulties, she needn’t come to us to help her, for I know she has as much as she can do to pay her way as it is, and it’s all very fine to say one mouth doesn’t make much difference. I’ve never found it so.’ Mrs Grant ended with an irritable glance at the butcher’s book lying on the table.

Miss Whateley sat, for a long time after Mrs Grant had gone, with Sybil on her lap, trying to imagine how it would feel to send the child to the workhouse; indeed, though the child had only been with her a week then, it was difficult to imagine being without her at all.

‘Of course, I can’t give the child all the nice things she’s been used to, but she doesn’t seem a bit dainty, and enjoys her bread and butter and milk, bless her! every bit as much as if it had been wedding cake and

champagne; and I can't dress her as nicely, though she really looks just as nice in that print pinafore I made as in anything, and, anyhow, it doesn't cost much to keep a child clean, and I can get up all her things myself as well as any laundress. But I do wish Maria had not put on that pinafore just when Mrs Grant was here; she'll think it so extravagant. I must put it away and keep it quite for best, though she does look sweet in it poor lamb.'

Through all these cogitations Sybil was sitting wonderfully quiet, the explanation of which was that she had Miss Whateley's knitting, and was producing wild disorder in that neat, ribbed, grey stocking, but fortunately, Mrs Grant was not there to see.

Miss Whateley had received no letter either from Mr or Mrs Harrington or any of the nearer relatives, who might naturally have been expected to be anxious about the fate of the child. When the news of the catastrophe first reached the ears of the Harrington kith and kin, there were not wanting kind hearts to think about little Sybil. There is plenty of kindheartedness in the world; most people have a certain amount of it, but it is thin and will not bear the strain of any trouble connected with carrying it out. That is the real test of kindness. There are few of us so cross-grained and ill-natured that we are not pleased to do a kindness that is no trouble, to offer unto the Lord or

our fellowmen that which costs us nothing; I expect we should, most of us, stop for a minute and say 'poor fellow' before we followed the priest and the Levite on the road to Jericho. But I am afraid the number is very much fewer who would take the trouble to pour in the wine and oil, and still fewer who would set the sufferer on their own beasts (and, by the way, I think kindness in the matter of horses and carriages is one of its rarest manifestations) or would give a thought to the twopence at parting.

I think there were at least eight or nine who said, on first hearing the news, 'I wonder what has become of the poor, little girl? Couldn't we have her here for a bit?'

Some of them, the wish being father to the thought, said, 'Of course they have taken the child with them.' And some of them said, 'We must find out about that'; but I think it was only two who actually did find out, and of these one forgot all about it in the cares and riches and pleasures of the world, and the other, with a vivid sense of the inconvenience of having the child foisted upon her—she always used the word 'foist,' though I do not know who was trying to palm off the child on her except her own conscience—came to the conclusion that it was better to leave well alone, and that, no doubt, this Miss Whateley was some rich old lady, godmother to the child, or a friend of Tom's.

Now, this last specimen of the priest and Levite who passed by on the other side in somewhat lingering fashion—though one can hardly carry out the simile and say that little Sybil had fallen among thieves—was Mrs Harrington Jones. She was very particular about the double name till the catastrophe happened, after which she was not so offended at hearing herself announced as simply Mrs Jones, which before then she had bitterly resented.

She and her husband had been among the losers by the failure, but, as they were too wise to put all their eggs into one basket, they only suffered from a slight diminution of income. Indeed, I think, on the whole, they ought to have esteemed it a benefit, as it gave Colonel Harrington Jones a good, substantial grievance that he could march out at dinner-parties, as the weather, the state of the roads, and the ritualistic practices at the neighbouring church had been worn threadbare.

It also gave a plausible excuse for leaving off subscriptions to various charities—a method of economising which certainly comes readiest to hand. So, too, it was quite out of the question taking the girls to Switzerland this year, of which he was heartily sick, and they would have to be satisfied with a house in the country, if they could find anything at a moderate rent, for August and September.

And, as luck would have it, this country house at a moderate rent offered itself at Colcroft, nine miles from Hayhurst, and was the very house that Tom Harrington's people had rented when he was a boy, and from whence he had visited Miss Whateley in his childhood, and in later years had ridden over and called on his way to the Meet.

It was very annoying to make this discovery after they were settled in and were inclined to like the place; but Mrs Harrington Jones decided that the relationship might well be ignored, and, with this view, she had some visiting cards printed with simple Mrs Jones on them, though she rather shuddered the first time she went out calling, shorn of her glories.

Nine miles in the country pretty well places people in another hemisphere, and people can safely calculate, in ordinary circumstances, on keeping clear of one another with such a stretch of green meadows and copses and furzy common land and waving elms between.

But you cannot calculate on the unexpected, and who could have anticipated that Mrs Grant and Mrs Jones would have sat side by side at a garden-party midway between Hayhurst and Colcroft, and would have made acquaintance over a cup of tea upset on Mrs Jones's dress by an embarrassed curate. From this they had fallen into conversation, in the course of

which Miss Whateley's name occurred, and Mrs Grant, encouraged by the evident interest of her listener, inveighed against that lady's conduct in receiving the child, adding some severe strictures on the relations, 'who, would you believe it, Mrs Jones, have never as much as written to ask what has become of the child?'

'Dear me, you don't say so!'

'Now, don't you call such conduct most shameful ; and Miss Whateley as poor as she can be?'

A murmur of assent from Mrs Jones, who discovered that it must really be time to be leaving ; and, in the flutter of saying goodbye and upsetting the folding chair as she rose to go, she was not obliged to perjure herself by echoing Mrs Grant's wish that they might meet again if Mrs Jones was making any stay in the neighbourhood.

'Odious woman !' Mrs Harrington Jones said, as she left the pleased and smiling Mrs Grant, who did not often find so willing a listener to her very local gossip.





CHAPTER VII.

AN UNPLEASANT DUTY.

Pretty bud !

Lily of the vale ! half-open'd bell of the woods !

Pledge of a love not to be mine. Farewell.

TENNYSON.



IT is all very well to do a virtuous action willingly, and at your own suggestion, but it is quite another matter when you are poked up and prompted, and, as Mrs Harrington Jones grew to think was the case in this instance, baited and bothered and driven up into a corner and forced to do it, whether you like it or not, and it requires a particularly saintly character to do a thing gracefully in such circumstances, real or imaginary.

Mrs Harrington Jones was one of those people of whom there are so many in the world, who do what is right in the most unpleasant way possible, making the path of virtue unnecessarily thorny, both for themselves and other people. She could feed the hungry, give

drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, and visit the sick in such a fashion that the recipients of her kind offices, however bitterly in need, would rather have been without them, and she would make it quite equally disagreeable for herself. She never expected gratitude, and I don't imagine she ever got it, for people seldom get what they don't expect. I do not fancy that kindness, done merely from a sense of duty, blesses either him that gives or him that takes. I am quite sure she would have gone to the stake for what she thought right, willingly, if not cheerfully, and would have spoken plainly to her persecutors, for whom, if the tables had been turned, she would have piled the faggots in their turn.

The days that followed Mrs Courtley's garden-party were uncomfortable ones at Colcroft, Mrs Harrington Jones's conscience being in such an excitable condition that she could not rest till she had upset every one else.

Two of the servants gave warning, which she set down at once to their dislike to the prospect of having a troublesome, spoilt child about the place, which proved conclusively to her mind that Prior read her letters, and pried into her drawers, for, as she had not mentioned the subject to the servants, how otherwise could they have known it? and, as a matter of fact, they did not.

She declined to order salmon from the fishmonger,

though she knew Colonel Harrington Jones's temper was always upset by the appearance of any other sort of fish, 'because the strictest economy will be necessary if we have all these additional expenses heaped upon us.'

She made cutting remarks about the amount of bacon eaten at the kitchen breakfast, till danger signals flamed out in the cheeks of the cook, and Mrs Harrington Jones was obliged to retract humbly, as cooks are not persons to be lightly trifled with in these days.

Colonel Harrington Jones, who was of a simpler and less subtle character than his wife, wanted to know why, if she did not wish to have the child, she should trouble herself about it? To his mind it was merely a question of doing a thing or leaving it alone, and there is an end of it,—a mode of looking at things which very much simplifies life, instead of, as many of us do, doing a thing, and being disagreeable and angry, or leaving it alone, and being remorseful and wretched.

But the end of it was that, three days after the garden-party at Mrs Courtley's, Mrs Harrington Jones ordered the carriage to come round at three, with an expression of stern resolution and sullen martyrdom. She fixed both day and hour peculiarly inconvenient to everybody, herself included. The girls particularly wished to go to a cricket-match that afternoon; an old friend was coming down from London for a few hours, to talk over some important event in her family—I

think it was marrying her daughter, or engaging a new French maid.

Colonel Harrington Jones had had out the horses for a long drive in the morning, and the coachman was grumbling already, as one of the horses was not well, and had better have been in the stable.

It was a thundery, oppressive day, and Mrs Harrington Jones had a headache, which had already been much aggravated by personally superintending the turning out of a box-room on the top landing, with a skylight and sloping roof, to serve as a bedroom for the small incubus.

‘And whatever you do, Emma, don’t tell the child about that rat that ran out from behind the chest. Ugh, horrid thing!’ and Mrs Harrington Jones drew up her skirts with a shudder.

‘I wouldn’t have slep’ in that room, after seeing that ’orrid, big thing, not if it were ever so!’ was Emma’s comment. ‘No more would Missis, either. My! you did oughter aseen how she jumped when the beast ran out, and for the life of me I couldn’t help hollerin’ out, it gave me such a turn; and “Emma,” says she, “there ain’t nothing to be frightened at, as they don’t do no ’arm,” she says, which is the first time I’ve heard ’em called ’armless.’

‘I’d have had the room repapered,’ Mrs Harrington Jones said several times that morning, ‘if there had

been time. A pretty paper with robins or daisies; it would make quite a pretty, little room; the sloping roof gives a picturesque, countrified effect, and I've had one of these pictures from the *Graphic* pasted up over the place where the damp has come through. I've seen to it all myself; no one can say that I have not taken the greatest pains to make it comfortable.'

'Qui s'excuse s'accuse,' and I am glad Mrs Harrington, yearning after her baby in another hemisphere, could not see the room prepared for her darling,—a room at which even Emma, who was the recognised drudge of the house, not entitled to have any tastes or opinions of her own, sniffed contemptuously. It would have been a real comfort to her, on the contrary, if she could have had a glimpse of Sybil, even that first night, in the very middle of Miss Whateley's bed, swallowed up in the frills of that lady's night-dress. Since then, a little cot had been turned out of the lumber-room, a cot perhaps dating from Miss Whateley's childish days. This was drawn close up to the bed, so that, if some sudden dream startled the child, or she woke with that indescribable sense of terror some young minds are subject to, a kind, old hand could reach out directly through the horror of darkness, and, if need were, a step over the wooden side of the crib would land her at once in safe, consoling arms.

'She's a little bit nervous at night, Don,' Miss

Whateley would confide to that attentive and sympathetic listener. 'I don't want to give way to her too much, and I tell her she is getting a big girl, and must learn to go to sleep without any one sitting by her, especially now she goes to bed by daylight. I have to be very firm with her, Don; I'm afraid sometimes I'm a little too strict, for she is such a baby thing, Don, and I can't bear to see her look so pitiful, especially at bedtime, with her mother no one knows where. I manage most nights to have some little things to do up in the bedroom,—drawers to tidy, or linen to look over,—and it's not long before she's asleep, bless her! and I keep the parlour door open, and I won't let Maria sing hymns, so that I may hear if she stirs.'

Who was to hear from the little box-room under the roof, down three flights of stairs in the dining-room, when the buzz of conversation rose high, and, 'Thomas, will you keep the door closed, there is such a terrible draught'? Or in the drawing-room, where the two girls were singing duets with strong lungs and well-trained voices? Or in the kitchen wing, shut off with double doors, where the servants' voices and laughter were of a tone and character hardly to be recognised as the same as the subdued speech and chastened smiles known to their employers?

If that hoary, old, grey rat had come out to resent this intrusion on his own special domain, which he had

enjoyed undisputed for a rat age, frightened hands would have felt in vain for a reassuring clasp, and a terrified, little heart might have sobbed itself sick and sore without any one coming to comfort.

But to return to that sultry August afternoon, and to Mrs Harrington Jones, sitting very upright in the carriage, going leisurely along the dusty roads with the coachman in high dudgeon on the box, resolved that, if he had to go out against his will, he would take his own time about it, bothered if he wouldn't!

Hayhurst is generally reckoned a very pretty village, but Mrs Harrington Jones described it as squalid, and glared at the inhabitants standing at the doors as if they had been Ojibeway Indians.

Miss Whateley was gardening, and I am bound to confess that her gardening costume was not calculated to impress strangers, least of all strangers in the temper in which Mrs Harrington Jones found herself. A very old, battered, straw hat was tilted down over her nose, which was heated with the afternoon sun and much stooping after weeds, and her skirt was pinned up in such a manner as to give the impression of almost aldermanic portliness of figure under the large, lavender print apron, and very large and dilapidated gardening gloves completed her costume. She was obliged to throw her head back, and look under the brim of her hat at the arrival, and when Mrs Harrington Jones addressed

her as 'my good woman,' and inquired where Miss Watkins lived, she pushed her hat to the back of her head with a glove that had a good deal of garden mould adhering to it, and left some of the same on her cheek and the tip of her nose.

Now, Mrs Harrington Jones knew as well as you or I that Watkins was not the name of the lady of whom she was in search; but she had the idea, firmly rooted in some minds, that aristocratic memories are, or should appear to be, unable to burden themselves with the accurate recollection of plebeian names, though she could have passed an examination in Debrett and taken honours.

I believe, too, that in her heart of hearts, Mrs Harrington Jones knew, or shrewdly suspected, that 'the good woman' she was addressing was Miss Whateley herself, and, if only she had been a countess, Mrs Harrington Jones would have quite revelled in the absence of conventionality and delightful eccentricity of her appearance.

But it is only above a certain rank that a defiance of Mrs Grundy can be tolerated, so Mrs Harrington Jones received Miss Whateley's embarrassed explanations of her identity, and stammering apologies for her appearance, with frigid politeness, tinged with disgust, and followed her into the house with the air of condescension she adopted with the 'lower orders,' and seated

herself, unbidden, on the sofa, fanning herself languidly, while Miss Whateley stood by the table with her hat pushed back, and the smear of mould across her nose, and yet with a certain dignity about her which was wanting in her visitor.

‘I understand, Miss Watkins—I beg your pardon—Miss Whateley, did you say?—that you have been good enough to take charge of Mr Harrington—Mr Tom Harrington’s child. It has been very good of you, I’m sure, and I hope sufficient remuneration has been allowed to repay you for the trouble. Mr Harrington is a distant connection of my husband’s, quite distant, so of course the child has no claim on him in any way: but directly we heard that she was here, we agreed that we could not allow you to be burdened a day longer in this manner, and so I have come to fetch her.’

Miss Whateley was silent, quite breathless with this sudden calamity which had befallen her, for to lose Sybil was nothing short of a calamity by this time; and Mrs Harrington Jones’s overbearing and decided manner gave the impression of the matter being absolutely irretrievable, and protest or objection being useless.

‘I will not speak of the extreme personal inconvenience it is to us to have the child,’—and then, as is usually the case when people say they will not speak of anything, she enlarged on the subject, while Miss

Whateley stood examining a hole in her gardening gloves, which had certainly seen better days.

‘They asked me to take care of her,’ Miss Whateley protested, feeling that she was being swept away by the torrent of Mrs Harrington Jones’s determination.

‘And very kind of you, I’m sure, but, of course, his relations—very distant relations though they may be—would not dream of allowing it to continue. If Mr Harrington, as I fear is not unlikely, has not kept you supplied with funds, and you will make out an account of what expense you have been put to, my husband will forward a cheque immediately. Though we have suffered already largely from our unfortunate relation, we could not dream of allowing you to be a loser in any way.’

Miss Whateley gave a little shudder. There was a certain kind of green caterpillar that attacked her rose-trees, that always affected her with that shuddering sort of feeling down the spine, though she was used to the wholesale and cold-blooded destruction of unpleasant vermin of many varieties, so perhaps she had found one of that sort lurking on her gardening gloves.

And, just then, the coachman, whom we have mentioned as being in a bad temper, and who did not find Hayhurst street in a broiling August sun improving to his frame of mind, flicked his whip, cutting off the head of one of Miss Whateley’s geraniums near the gate,

and making the horses start and paw and jingle the harness, which Mrs Harrington Jones knew was an intimation that he was impatient.

Most overbearing people are overborne by somebody else, and Mrs Harrington Jones had a wholesome respect for her coachman and cook.

‘I must not keep the horses waiting,’ she said. ‘Where is the child?’

And Miss Whateley meekly went to the back door and called ‘Don.’

Now, when Mrs Grant came, and Miss Whateley wished to impress her with the simplicity and homeliness of the child’s attire, little Miss had come in tricked out in muslin and lace, and with her hair newly brushed out into bright sunshine. Now, contrariwise, when Miss Whateley would have liked her to come in looking her best and sweetest, she came rioting in with Don, torn and dirty and rough-looking. ‘Such a tomboy!’ Miss Whateley sighed to herself, ‘and as if she had not seen a comb or soap and water all day!’

Don, unprepared for the presence of a stranger, left hold of Sybil, and backed into the passage, and Sybil, in that boisterous, unrestrainable, high spirits that had not had time to quiet down from the romp she was having when she was called in, flew at Miss Whateley, and clung round her petticoats, rippling over with bursts of laughter and little excited shrieks of merriment,

and breathless explanations of what 'me and Don was doing.'

'And you know, Don, when she once gets into one of those laughing fits there is no stopping her,' Miss Whateley said mournfully, afterwards, 'and I don't know what her aunt could have thought of her. She must have seemed such a rude, little girl; and such a dirty pinafore, and her socks all slipped down inside her boots, as if she had none on.'

I am afraid Mrs Harrington Jones's impression of Sybil was not favourable. She had last seen her in Brooke Street as a dainty, little, dressed-out doll, and though she had animadverted on pampering and tricking-out children, and had been very severe, she had imagined her the same, in a modified form, at Colcroft, playing about with handsome toys, relics of former pampering; prettily dressed in clothes, relics of former tricking-out, and being displayed to admiring friends.

But this little, rough, ragged, noisy creature, clinging round Miss Whateley with scratched, sunburnt arms, and lifting up a dirty, rosy face, under a hopeless tangle of rough curls, was a different matter, and Mrs Harrington Jones's face lengthened as she looked at the child through her gold eye-glasses.

'Go and speak to your aunt, Sybby, like a good girl.'

'Not her aunt, Miss Whateley. I think I explained, the relationship was very remote, and if you could kindly

have her face and hands washed, and her hair put a little bit tidy, I think we had better be going,' said Mrs Harrington Jones, ignoring a certainly very grubby little hand which Sybil, under Miss Whateley's remonstrances, offered to her.

'What is it?' whispered Don, breathlessly, as Miss Whateley came out, leading Sybil, who had quieted down now from her exuberant mirth, and was looking from one to the other, half inclined to cry, in the revulsion that so often follows over-high spirits.

'She's come to fetch her away,' Miss Whateley whispered back.

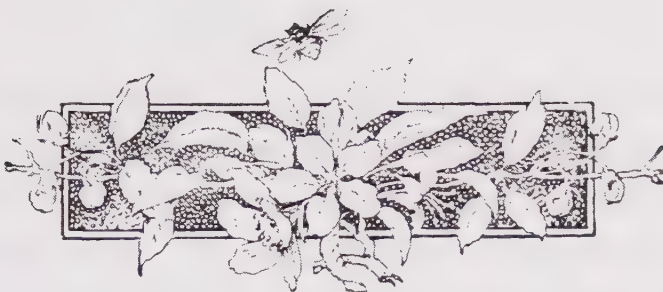
'Away!'

'Don't, Don, it's for the child's good; don't upset her. Sybil's going for a nice drive with kind auntie' (ignoring the remoteness of relationship). 'She shall have her best frock on, and pretty hat.'

And with trembling hands and quivering lips, and with a sharp little cough now and then to keep her throat clear, and blinking away the moisture that gathered in her eyes, Miss Whateley washed and combed and dressed Sybil, as she thought for the last time. The child had often gone with her mother driving in the Park, so she was quite pleased and excited now at the prospect, and could hardly stand still to be dressed, so interested was she in the pair of horses that champed and tossed their heads at Miss Whateley's

gate; and she let herself be lifted in by Don, who forgot all his usual shyness and unwillingness to meet the human eye, and she settled herself down on the seat by Mrs Harrington Jones, and kissed her hand again and again to Miss Whateley and Don, and to Maria in the background, and even to Tabbyskins on the Vicarage wall; and then the carriage turned the corner by the Green Man, and the little smiling face was out of sight, and Miss Whateley turned back into the house with the hot tears raining down her face and turning the smear of mould into mud, and Don went striding off into the woods with the necklace of cotton reels with which Sybil had adorned him still round his neck, and the reins by which she had been driving him tied to his arms and dragging at his heels.





CHAPTER VIII.

A NAUGHTY CHILD.

You were so far away,
Beyond all help from me ;
And so, when skies were grey,
And clouds lowered threateningly,
And the wailing storm-winds blew,
My heart went out to you.

K. TYNAN.

I HAVE not been able to sleep all night, Don,' Miss Whateley said next morning, and her haggard face fully supported the statement, and Don did not look much brighter, though, mercifully, sleep is not so easily scared away by trouble in youth as it is in age.

'I have not been able to sleep all night, Don, for thinking about the child, and if I did right to let her go. Her father trusted her to me, and I've tried to do a mother's part by her, though I did not let her have jam every day for tea. And I think she was happy

with me, Don, though, of course, I could not give her all she was accustomed to, and she did not fret after her mother, as would have seemed natural at first, and ate so heartily it was quite a pleasure to see her, and I had to let out the band of her little petticoat, so she wasn't pining or getting thinner, bless her ! though she was never still one moment from morning till night, and I thought sometimes would quite wear herself out. I wish I had told Mrs Harrington Jones more of her little ways, and of her being a little nervous in the dark, and how she was learning to eat her crusts as good as gold, instead of throwing them under the table, which her nurse seems to have allowed ; but I was so anxious yesterday that she should not cry, or be upset anyhow, that I did not say half I ought to. If I wasn't afraid of unsettling her, I think I'd get Mrs Priest to drive me over in her pony-cart, though she charges a good deal, and the pony shies at everything by the side of the road. But I suppose it's better not to go, and children soon get happy, and she's not shy, and makes herself at home wherever she is.'

'I shouldn't have let her go,' Don said, gloomily. 'I didn't like the looks of the old lady at all.'

'Didn't you, now?' Miss Whateley answered anxiously. 'I thought she was hot and a little put about, and I've been thinking, Don, I ought to have offered her a cup of tea, but I was so taken aback, being

in my gardening apron and not fit to be seen, that I daresay she thought me very rude.'

'I don't think much for her manners,' Don said, and if his sisters had heard it, they would have laughed at the idea of his criticising such matters. 'She didn't offer to shake hands with you, and she just flounced into the carriage as if the ground was not good enough for her to stand on, and she never as much as said "thank you" when I picked up her parasol. If these are fine-lady manners, I can't say I admire them, and it's a pity Sybil should learn 'em.'

'Where is the place she's gone to?' he asked, after they had been sitting a few minutes in moody silence. 'I've a good mind to step over and see how she's getting along. Oh! I won't upset her. I'll just hang about and see what she's about, and if she seems jolly, I'll keep out of sight and not let her know I'm there.'

'But it's nine miles to Colcroft,' Miss Whateley said; 'it's over past Southridge and Clanford, ever so far.'

'All right,' said Don, 'I know whereabouts it is, and I'll get over somehow, no fear.'

'But your father, Don, and your lessons?'

'He won't mind,' said Don, with a little twinkle in the corner of his eye, 'it will be a holiday for him, poor, old boy, and he'll make it square with the mater,'—a way of speaking of his parents which shocked Miss Whateley's mind, which held to the old-fashioned inter-

pretation of the fifth commandment, though she passed it over on the present occasion unrebuked, as she was almost sickeningly anxious to get news of the child.

‘You won’t get your dinner, Don.’

He shrugged his shoulders. Meal times were of little importance to Don, if, by the sacrifice of them, he could get an egg for his collection, or a rare moth, and he made up for it at the next meal, and no one thought of providing, as Miss Whateley did that day, a goodly package of sandwiches and a wedge of cake. Don would have gone double the distance so handsomely provisioned, and Miss Whateley would have gone without dinner for a week to supply the messenger who was going to bring her news of Sybil.

She felt a little guilty when the Vicarage servant ran in to ask if Master Don was there, as ‘his par’ wanted him, but she added that it was of no consequence, and didn’t signify, it was only about the spade which Master Don had carried off; and as Miss Whateley at once lent hers, the servant assured her that that was better than Master Don himself, who, most like, had lost or broken the thing, and would take ever so long to remember what had become of it.

Miss Whateley could not settle to anything all day, and she began to expect Don’s return almost before he was out of sight. The nine miles that had seemed almost an infinite distance as she watched Mrs Harrington

Jones's carriage disappearing from sight, carrying little Sybil into another universe, was reduced to a few steps now that Don so calmly undertook the journey on foot, and she even began to plan strolling over some day, when the weather was not quite so warm and the dusty roads not quite so trying to the feet. She kept looking at the clock, and wondering how far he had got on his way there or back, and as she sat down to her solitary mid-day meal, at which Maria, with cruel thoughtlessness, had laid the spoon and fork and the mug with 'for a good girl' on it, as usual, she reckoned, and certainly very much without her host, that Don would receive a hospitable welcome at Colcroft after his long walk, and would have a plentiful meal before he set off on his return journey, even if they did not insist on sending him back in one of their carriages. It is not always safe to judge of others by oneself, and, in such cases as Miss Whateley's, must lead to bitter disappointment, but then there are few Miss Whateleys, and there is a general average of kind-heartedness, or want of the same, that may be reckoned on; so, perhaps, you and I, dear reader, would have been nearer the mark in guessing at Mrs Harrington Jones's reception of Don, if he had, as Miss Whateley imagined he would, presented himself at the front door and been ushered into the drawing-room.

Don managed the journey to Colcroft pretty comfortably, going a mile or two of the way in West the

keeper's little cart, with a troop of shooting dogs behind him. West was a friend of his, a friendship beginning with fierce animosity over continual trespassing and exploring of pheasant coverts on Don's part, and more than one solemn complaint to the vicar. This proving of no avail, forcible ejectments, with liberal use of a stout ash stick, were resorted to, which also proving unavailing, West, like a wise man, made a friend of the boy, who might have been an awkward customer as an enemy, and who knew every hole and corner of the coverts better than West himself, and was acquainted with the ways and manners of every wild thing, furred or feathered, and possessed a sort of freemasonry with dogs which comes by nature, and which no diligent study or careful cultivation can impart.

‘Why, I’d rather have that lad along of me when we’re beating up for eggs than a dozen Woodruffs or Perkins, as don’t find a nest till their foot’s right into it, and half of the eggs broke.’

So Don was safe of a seat in West's cart as far as it was going on his road, and then a thrashing machine came along, with a driver he knew on one of the engines, so he had another lift and the supreme felicity of trying his hand at engine-driving, getting, meanwhile, rather smutty about the face and hands for a caller on such an elegant person as Mrs Harrington Jones; and the miller's waggon from Hinckley Mill, which was his

next means of locomotion, did not improve matters by the sprinkling of flour it added to his toilette.

Don had a natural intuition for short cuts, so, instead of following the drive, he struck off across the park-like meadow surrounding Colcroft, and found himself by the sunk fence dividing the meadow from the garden. There was a big tennis lawn, with the courts marked out, and rackets and balls lying about, showing that it had been recently used, as did also some wicker chairs in the shadow of a big cedar.

A loud gong had sounded as he turned in from the road, and no doubt had called the tennis-players in to lunch, and most likely Sybil among them, so he sat down in the sunk fence in a nice, shady place, and prepared to have his luncheon too, being hungry after his long walk, and Miss Whateley's substantial sandwiches looking decidedly appetising.

But he was only just preparing to attack the first when a little, low, sobbing sound in the garden, just above his head, caught his ear, and he stopped with his mouth wide open to the extent demanded by Miss Whateley's sandwiches, and listened, and then his mouth shut with a snap, and sandwich and cake rolled down on to the grass, and Don was up the wall of the sunk fence somehow, anyhow, and had a sobbing, choking, clinging, little Sybil in his arms, burying her face in his neck and his jacket, or her own fat hands or pinafore,

to try and stifle the uncontrollable cries that the poor, little soul had learnt in that short time must be kept to herself.

‘What is it, Syb? What have they been doing to you? Ain’t you happy? What is it?’

But the convulsive sobs made explanation difficult, and only here and there a word jerked out. ‘Sybil—naughty—auntie—home.’

When he made any move, or tried to unclasp her almost strangling hold from his neck, her sobs became more violent, getting almost to screams, so he sat quite still, holding her with a gentle, little, rocking motion that was very soothing, till she got a little quieter, and then he said, ‘Sybby, I’m going to take you right away home to Miss Whateley.’

The renewed outburst of sobbing this produced was plainly more from joy than grief, for she let him put her down, and herself led the way to a little wicket, from whence a steep path led down into the meadow, and she let him, when safely out of sight of the house, wipe her tears away, and pull her sunbonnet on to her head, and she helped him pack up the sandwiches and cake in a parcel again, even by that time being sufficiently recovered to nibble a little bit of the cake, which had the delightful home taste about it that not all the elegant and ornamental productions of Mrs Harrington Jones’s cook could compete with.

They were just ready for a start when voices up above, in the garden, stopped them, and Don drew in, close under the fence, and at a sign from him Sybil did the same.

‘Where is that tiresome child?’ a fretful voice said. ‘I declare she has quite upset me, and I don’t feel fit for the flower-show this afternoon, I’ve such a nervous headache.’

‘Oh, never mind the child. We’ll tell Simpson to look for her, and give her some dinner. It’s more than she deserves, naughty, little thing!’

Sybil’s face was puckering ominously, so that Don squeezed the hand in his tight, in terror of an outburst, which would betray their presence, for one of the speakers was so immediately above them that they could see the ribbed grey sole of the toe of a tennis shoe and a racket tapping impatiently against it.

‘It’s too bad!’ the same voice went on, ‘that that little monkey should upset all the peace and comfort of the family. I’m sure the yelling she made last night, when she went to bed, was enough to make anyone’s head ache for a week.’

‘Sybil! Sybil!’ called Mrs Harrington Jones’s voice, with a certain enforced calm in its accents as of temper kept under control.

‘Oh, she won’t answer, mother, you may call all the afternoon. Anyone can see that she’s one of those

sulky tempers; she's been grizzling about all the morning, looking as cross as a bear, when any other little girl would have been pleased to pick up the balls for Alice and me. I should just leave her to herself to come round. By tea-time she'll be hungry, and come to her senses. It's no use giving way to spoilt children, there's no end to it if you once begin.'

Listeners never hear any good of themselves, the proverb says, and poor, little Sybil was no exception to the rule, though I do not suppose she quite realised that she was the ill-behaved, spoilt, troublesome child who was being talked of; and if Don's hand had not tightened warningly on hers every time her mouth opened, she might have remarked, as she did when Miss Whateley read stories to her, 'what a very naughty, little girl that must have been!'

'Mother!' another voice called from a little distance. 'Father wants to know if you'll be ready to start in half an hour?'

Then followed a short discussion as to whether she could possibly go till she knew where that child was, objections growing fainter, and finally overruled by the daughters, who carried her off ultimately to get ready, promising to send Simpson to find the child, a promise which they forgot immediately, and did not

think of again till they returned late in the evening after a most delightful time at the flower show and primrose fête, when they found a telegram on the hall table from Miss Whateley containing these words, 'Sybil safe with me. Do not be anxious. Will write.'

I do not quite know how Don got Sybil over those nine miles, for there were no keeper's cart, or traction engines, or miller's waggons going that dusty, weary way, and they only got a very short lift in a milk-cart, and that stopped so often that Don got impatient of its slow progress and prolonged conversations with smiling maid-servants at back doors, and got out and soon left it far behind.

Sybil went most of the way pickaback, but it was not on such a lively charger as the one who had carried her the first day of her acquaintance with Don, and, as they neared Hayhurst, it was a very lame one, and when he set her down at Miss Whateley's gate he tumbled over on to the grass, where the dew was beginning to appear, and lay, pretty well exhausted, while Sybil trotted up the well-known path, and pushed open the door, and walked straight into Miss Whateley's arms, which had been mentally stretching out after her ever since she left, and now closed comfortably round her, as if they could never let do.

It was not for some days afterwards that Miss Whateley realised that Don had carried Sybil best part of those nine miles, for he was ready a few minutes later to take the telegram to the post office; indeed, he originated the idea of telegraphing, as Miss Whateley had never sent a telegram in her life, and only once, as we know, received one.

He demurred at putting 'don't be anxious,' as he did not think they would be, and he was not convinced by Miss Whateley's argument that she herself would be just frantic if she did not know where the child was. He also assisted in the composition of the letter, in which Miss Whateley said she thought that, as Mr Harrington had asked her to take care of the child, it would not be right for her to let her go anywhere else. And as the child had found her way back (how, she did not mention), she had better remain there till her parents came for her, thanking them very heartily, all the same, for their kind intention (thanks to which Don again demurred).

Of course this letter was not written till Sybil had been fed and was snugly in bed. Miss Whateley was quite anxious because the child was neither so hungry nor so tired as she expected her to be, and she was afraid lest privation and fatigue might have caused some subtle but permanent injury that might show itself later on.

‘But I was eating ever so much all the way,’ Sybil protested. ‘Nice cake, what Don had, and bread and meat, lots and lots!’

‘And what did Don have?’

‘Oh, he had the crusts.’





CHAPTER IX.

THE TOLLING BELL.

Where thou hast touched, O wondrous Death !
Where thou hast come between,
Lo, there for ever perisheth
The common and the mean.

TRENCH.

FIVE years have gone by since my last chapter, and on a dull, drizzling, November afternoon, the bell from the old brick tower of Hayhurst church was tolling out its solemn tidings of the passing of a soul out of this life into another.

The first deep note startled the sparrows in the thick ivy on the tower, and made them fly out, sending a shower of drops pattering down on the mossy grave-stones below, drops that had been gathering on the leaves through the misty, sodden day, like tears gathering in the sad eyes watching round a dying bed.

That knell, suddenly sounding, caused many a one in

Hayhurst to stop in his or her occupation to listen, with foot still pressing the spade through the damp clod, with brawny arm raised to bring the great hammer down on the red-hot metal on the anvil, with fingers dropping a pinch more tea to turn the scale of a quarter of a pound, with needle half-drawn out of the darn in the master's stockings, even with small back bent for the purposes of leap-frog, all paused to listen; and out in the meadows round, where the mist was gathering and imperceptibly mixing with the shades of evening, the carters checked their smoking horses to hear the sound, muffled by the thick air.

They all of them knew what it meant, though the illness which rendered the living of Hayhurst vacant had only lasted for two or three days. If you walked along the village street, a minute later, after the first startled silence was over, you would hear loud exclamations of regret interchanged from one cottage door to another, without any respect to creeds, the dissenters being as ready to testify to the loss the village had sustained in the death of the vicar as the Church people themselves.

‘A good Christian man, for sure!’

‘Dear, dear! and abeen about the place this thirty year!’

‘And as nice-spoken a gentleman as you ’d meet anywhere.’

‘And a good heart, a real, feelin’ heart, if anyone was in trouble, that he was!’

And so on, in various keys. We say that death is a great leveller, and we think of crowned heads brought low, and peer and peasant’s ashes sown in corruption, but it levels up as well as down, for, as a rule, the follies and weaknesses are lost sight of when life is over, and virtues imputed to the departed which had not been discovered before. Certainly, a day or two before, you could not have mustered such a chorus of praise in Hayhurst; it was only too easy to pick holes in the kind, sleepy, old vicar, who had shambled through his thirty years’ cure of the souls of Hayhurst in a very slipshod, light and airy way; as it neared the end, growing more indolent and inefficient day by day, giving up all attempts to compete with the earnest, enthusiastic, young baptist minister who was gradually drawing away the congregation and Sunday school from Mr Grant’s weak and listless grasp. Perhaps, on this score, the dissenters had good ground for regretting him, as little Bethel had become of late so full that serious consideration was being given to the advisability of enlarging it.

The sound of the bell found its way, among other places, into Miss Whateley’s little parlour, which looked pleasant and warm compared with the November evening outside, where misty blankets were beginning to be drawn up and obscure the neighbouring houses.

Miss Whateley did not hear it, for she was just a little bit deaf, though she would not allow it,—always setting down any mistakes arising from it to the indistinct utterance of the speaker. But the little girl who was sitting in the window, straining her eyes over a book in the waning light, heard it, and got up with a start, letting the book drop on the ground.

Miss Whateley did not like her to read by the fire-light, having the prejudice many nourish, that it is better to strain your eyes to any extent in the twilight than read with ease by a roaring fire. Not that Miss Whateley's fire was given to roaring, but just now the main light from the room came from it. The time that Miss Whateley described as 'blindman's holiday' had come early that afternoon, and it would have been unheard-of extravagance to light the lamp by four o'clock in November, 'and nearly a month yet before the shortest day.' So Miss Whateley had been sitting idle for a few minutes, and Sybil had seen her cap give more than one little nod, and shrewdly suspected she was having a nap. Don very often came in about that time, between the lights, and drew the three-legged stool, that had grown to be called Don's stool, to the fire, though he was six feet, and broad in proportion, and might well have chosen a more substantial seat. But Sybil did not expect him to-day, because she knew his father was ill, and she had been up to inquire earlier in

the afternoon, and had brought back the message that he was no better.

Sybil has grown since we saw her last, out of the baby into a slim little maiden of nine, tall for her age, and still with that little air of distinction that Miss Whateley's friends rather resented in a child living on charity. There was always a tone of disapproval of Sybil in Hayhurst, except in the case of Miss Whateley and Don and Maria and a few humbler friends, who adored her. The episode of Mrs Harrington Jones, and Sybil's short stay at Colcroft, got about in a very garbled form, and, as Miss Whateley declined to say anything about it, it was generally supposed that the child had behaved so abominably that she had been packed off back to Miss Whateley the very next day, and that her relations refused to have anything more to do with her.

‘And Mrs Jones, or Mrs Harrington Jones, I believe she is called, is such a charming person,’ Mrs Grant said; ‘I met her once at a garden-party, and was quite fascinated by her, and I am so sorry we never happened to meet again during her stay at Colcroft. She is so terribly short-sighted that, when I saw her once at Kingham, she passed close by without recognising me, and I am sure it was accidental, for we took a mutual fancy to one another at Mrs Courtley’s.’

Miss Whateley's nap was unusually sound this after-

noon, for Sybil's startled movement and the falling book did not wake her, and the child, after listening for the second, deep, thrilling note, slipped quietly out of the room, and, winding a big woollen shawl round her and over her head, ran out, down the damp garden-path and into the misty road.

At the end of the Vicarage wall a turnstile leads into a short pathway to the churchyard, a pleasant, shady, little bit on hot Sunday afternoons, where lovers lingered on their way to church, but now heaped with dead leaves, and damp and sodden with the drippings of the dead leaves overhead, and of the masses of bushy ivy on the top of the old wall.

In the churchyard the mist was forming itself into curious, straight lines and wreaths, through which some of the big square tombs loomed large and near, and it required some courage in a small, fluttering heart to run past the dim monsters, especially with that great, vibrating note thrilling her through.

The belfry door was a little open, and through the crack came a feeble red light which struggled vainly to make its way through the mist, and was baffled before it reached the first tombstone.

Sybil hesitated a moment at the door with a momentary misgiving lest death itself, as represented in pictures, with scythe and hour-glass, might be ringing the knell, but was encouraged by the sound of the

grunting rub of the rope as it ran up after the pull, which sounded human and natural, so she pushed open the small, heavy door and went in.

The lantern from which the feeble red ray came stood on the floor, throwing strange shadows of the bell-ropes up into the cobwebby dimness above and the corners of the belfry. It cast a weird, Rembrandt-like light on an old gargoyle that had grinned down in satyr-like derision on many generations of bell-ringers, and lighted up the face of the man who stood holding the rope in his hands ready for another pull.

It was Don, ringing his father's knell.

He had grown, in these five years, into a great, strong, young fellow, clumsy and awkward still, but with a look of strength about him that took off from the loutish appearance, and with an honest, open-air look in his face that almost redeemed it from ugliness. These five years had slipped away and turned Don from a boy into a man, and nothing had been done to start him in life, though there were periodical outbursts at him as a lazy, hulking fellow, especially when either of his brothers came down and flourished their prosperity and independence in the face of their family, or when, as more often happened, there were no means to meet the bills, and some one must be blamed, so why not Don?

He had not a word to say for himself on these occasions; he felt the justice of their reproaches; it

certainly was outrageous for a great, strong, young man to be eating his head off in idleness, consuming bread that could not be paid for, and wearing out clothes that could not be replaced, and becoming such a disreputable object that his sisters did not like to be seen with him.

The work he got through in the day was never taken into account, nor the gardener's wages which he saved by doing the work, and cleaning the boots and knives, nor all the fetching and carrying, and the rough carpentering and mending he effected after a fashion. If it would not have been below the dignity of the parson's son to take a labourer's wages, many of the farmers would have been glad to engage him at haytime or harvest, and, as it was, he gave his labour for nothing, and worked harder than the best of them. He did most of the work, too, of old Jervis, the clerk and sexton, who was rheumatic and stiff, and had got into the habit of saying, 'Just step on to the Vicarage, and let Master Don know,' when a knell had to be rung or a grave dug in bad weather.

And this was how it came to pass that Don was ringing his own father's knell, and that little Sybil knew where to find him.

It was not the first time she had found her way there, but when she came in, wrapped in the big white shawl, Don was startled, for he had come straight away from his father's deathbed, and when you have been

close to the threshold of the other world, it does not seem impossible for spirits to pass back from thence. It is such a short step from this world into the next, that it seems at first as if it must be equally short to come back, though one soon realises the infinite distance.

But the little, white apparition did not hesitate a moment at the door, but sprang across to him, clinging round his neck, and drawing down his head to press her soft cheek to his, with soft, little, indistinct sounds of sympathy and love and pity.

No one had thought of comforting him before. There had been plenty of kind fussing over his mother and sisters, exhortations to bear up, and cups of tea coming in every few minutes; but Don, who had watched night and day, and lifted and soothed the sick man as none of the others had the power to do, and had held the dying head on his arm till it was numb and stiff with the constrained position, and whose name had been the last the feeble voice had whispered,—Don was hustled out of the room, and the awful realities of death pitilessly forced upon him, not a minute allowed to bury his head in the bed-clothes, and sob for the kind, old father, who, with all his faults and weaknesses, had been the centre of home to the lad.

No one thought he had any feelings of natural grief; he hardly knew he had himself, till Sybil's arms

were round his neck, and her soft cheek, wet with her tears or the drops of mist, pressed against his. And then he began to cry, wiping his eyes on the sleeve as his arm went up with the rope, and with long, deep sobs that thrilled the little girl clinging to him as the vibrations of the big bell up above.

‘He thought he was going to get better last night, Sybby, and he talked a good deal when they were all asleep, and said we’d go to the sea together when he was stronger, just him and me. He got quite jolly talking of it. It would be a regular lark, he said—yes, he said “lark,” Sybby,’ Don whispered, as if it were rather profane even to remember a harmless slang word on lips that were dead.

‘He was very fond of you, Don.’

Much sniffing and rubbing on the coat sleeve was necessary before anything further.

‘He was awfully good to me, Sybby. I don’t suppose any chap had such a father as mine.’

Even Miss Whateley had sometimes criticised the vicar in a very gentle way, and from time to time the comments of sharper tongues had come to Sybil’s ears, more especially as regards letting Don go on without any prospect of earning his living, or making his way in the world; but Sybil felt that death set everything in a different light, just as some of the French verbs are hardly recognisable in the past tense, though you may

know them by heart in the present, and death had turned the page of grammar, and set before her the old vicar in the past tense.

But there was a subject which Sybil had been deeply pondering as she sat in the window in the gathering dusk, a subject which the first dull sound of the tolling bell had brought still more urgently to her consideration—Who was to be clergyman now Mr Grant was gone?

During his illness, stray curates from various neighbouring villages had come over, each with some little peculiar ritual of his own, but Sybil knew this was only temporary, a sort of clerical charing,—like having Mrs Tomkins when Maria went for a holiday,—and could not go on indefinitely. When Mr Machin, the carpenter, died, his son took to the business, and he was not so old as Don, and his mother had to make out the bills because he was so bad at his schooling; and there was young Green, who was playing marbles at the corner by the pump the day of his father's accident, and was at church the Sunday after the funeral in a top hat with a big hat-band round it, and decided symptoms of whiskers on his cheeks, as befitted the owner of Hayhurst Farm where the old farmer was not, and Jacob his son reigned in his stead.

So, arguing from these parallel cases, Sybil thought that Don might probably succeed to his father's living, and her mind had already travelled on to chapters con-

taining long and crack-jaw words, which she knew Don could hardly tackle, resolving that she would get auntie, whose pronunciation of Hebrew names she never for a moment doubted, to look through the lessons before service-time, and prepare the way for the new vicar. As to the sermons, she knew that Mr Grant had a set of fine, old, crusted sermons, which he preached in rotation. Miss Whateley knew some of them almost by heart, but none the less, or perhaps rather the more, appreciated them, being prepared for all the points, and already convinced by all the arguments, so that if, by any chance, on a hot summer afternoon, a few minutes' unconsciousness supervened, she could soon recover her place without losing the thread of the discourse.

So that being the case, what would be easier than for Don to preach his father's sermons, only, perhaps, now and then he might leave out a bit, when the day was very sunny and bright, and swallows darted past the windows with a twit-twit, flouting their exquisite freedom before the face of people sitting cooped up in musty pews. All these details floated through Sybil's mind, with little plans of her own of having some finger in the pie, if it were to keep the surplice darned tidily, or the cobwebs from gathering round the pulpit cushions.

But it was not till the final note had sounded out, solemn and slow, and Don twisted the rope round the

peg, and drew on his coat, that Sybil put her thought into words.

‘Shall you read the service next Sunday, Don?’

‘Me?’

His tone told her that she had made a mistake, and she hurried to explain her question away. ‘Oh no, of course not, how silly I am. You’re not old enough, Don, are you, to do it yet?’

And then Don turned with his coat half on, and his voice sounded hoarse and strange to the little girl. ‘No, and if I lived to be a hundred I couldn’t. And I’ll never be fit for anything that my father’s son ought to. Here I am, a full-grown man, and as ignorant as a ploughboy; worse, too, for some of these little chaps at the school know a heap more than I do. I haven’t bothered about it much; it didn’t seem much good bothering, but somehow, since he went, it seems to have come on me all of a sudden what it means to be a gentleman’s son who can’t ever hope to be a gentleman.’

And then he caught up the lantern, and shut the belfry door with a slam, clashing the big key round in the lock, and went shouldering off along the wet path, with the swaying lantern making ineffectual attempts, right and left, to pierce the mist, while little Sybil pattered forlornly behind, feeling he had quite forgotten her.

Forgotten her? Not he!

‘Take care, Sybby, there’s a big puddle by the gate,’
and he stopped to throw a light on the place.

‘Does it matter very much, Don?’

‘What? The puddle?’

‘No, being a gentleman?’





CHAPTER X.

FUTURE PROSPECTS.

'Tis but to keep the nerves at a strain,
Dry one's eyes and laugh at a fall,
And, baffled, get up and begin again,
So the chase takes up one's life—that's all!

BROWNING.



ONE of the saddest consequences of the presence of death in most of the pretty vicarages scattered up and down this land of ours, is the immediate turning out it entails upon widow and children, with the often terrible cloud of 'dilapidations' to darken and harass their departure.

When you run your eye down the ecclesiastical intelligence, and see the new appointments to various benefices, do you ever think of the outgoing family, or are all your sympathies for the ingoing incumbent, who, having got a living, is going to marry on it, and bring his Angelina home to that pleasant vicarage, which will

require a good deal of painting and papering to make it a worthy casket to receive such a jewel. He will arrange his brand-new books of divinity on the shelves where the tattered old volumes stood, and lay down as a new asparagus bed the bit of garden which the children cultivated as their own special domain.

On the evening of the vicar's funeral a solemn family conclave was taking place in the old study, the scene of so many peaceful mornings in which the vicar dozed placidly in his chair, and Don diverted himself at his own sweet will.

The funeral had been a most impressive testimony to the respect felt in the place and neighbourhood for the deceased gentleman, and of the sympathy felt with his bereaved widow and family.

'It was really very gratifying,' Mrs Grant sighed. 'Who was that last wreath from that arrived just as we were starting for church, Laura?'

Outside, in the November dusk, the new-made grave was covered with what the undertakers call 'floral tributes.' Don could see it through the gap in the laurels, as he stood in the study window with his face pressed against the glass, till some one rather tartly bid him pull down the blind and draw the curtains. It seemed like shutting out the old father into the damp and cold, out of the firelight and warmth of the family circle gathered round the hearth.

Mrs Grant, rather nervously, kept recurring to the incidents of the funeral, to the flowers that were sent, to the faces she had recognised, to the tears that had been shed, greedily, poor soul, gathering up all the crumbs of consideration and respect that had been shown, with the sad consciousness that this was probably the last occasion on which she would appear as an important figure on any scene. And perhaps, too, she rather dreaded the discussion of the future,—a future that, as we have already said, has, with clergymen's widows, to begin so abruptly, and there was a painfully 'now-to-business' look about Harry, her eldest son, as he drew up his chair to the table, and tried the nib of a pen on his thumb nail.

He and George had both a somewhat difficult announcement to make; each of them would have liked above everything to have been in a position to offer a home to their mother, but neither of them were able to do so, though neither of them could clearly see what prevented the other.

'If I,' George said, 'had a nice, little house, and a wife to take care of her, you may depend there should be a warm corner by my fireside for my dear mother.'

'Dear boy!' sobbed Mrs Grant.

Now Harry *had* a nice, little, suburban house, and a very up-to-date wife, though I doubt if he *had* a warm corner by his fireside, there were so many fender stools

and Japanese fans ; but he could not help feeling, as he hastened to explain, that, if he had still been a bachelor, able to live where he pleased, and without any home ties, that nothing would have been so delightful as to have made a home for his mother.

‘ Harry always was his mother’s boy,’ murmured Mrs Grant.

Miriam, the eldest daughter, with rather a blighted aspect, and a long-suffering, red nose, who had endured martyrdom, unknown to the most ingenious persecutors of the early Christians, at the hands of a fiendish old lady, to whom, poor soul, she was companion, sniffed plaintively, feeling that it was hardly worth while to explain what she would have done if £10 a year and find her own laundress had given any scope for filial generosity ; while Laura and Ruth, who had not, as yet, left the parent nest, though they had fluttered their wings repeatedly in the hopes of soaring into the sunshine of matrimony, but alas ! in vain, became suddenly engrossed in the crape on their cuffs.

And then, simultaneously, they all turned upon Don, —Don standing silent and awkward by the window, in the clumsy black clothes made by the village tailor, taller by a head than either of his brothers, with a certain rough manliness about him that was wanting in the others, perhaps polished off by London life.

He was so big and strong-looking, it might, to those

who did not know the circumstances of his bringing-up, have seemed natural that he should be the support of his widowed mother ; indeed, he felt the force of it himself, and behaved like the culprit they considered him.

‘ Well, Don ? ’ Harry said, with that thin, acid tone in his voice, and curve of his lips, which made young ladies say, ‘ Oh, Mr Grant, don’t be so satirical. ’ ‘ Well, Don, and what do you propose to do to help ? It’s about time, I should think, that you did something for your own support, at anyrate, and ceased to be a gentleman at large. ’

Don fidgeted his broad shoulders, but made no reply, and George took up the running, with his eyes narrowed into straight lines, that raked poor Don’s big, clumsy hulk from stem to stern, and made him miserably conscious of the defects of his clothing.

‘ Don’t you be in a hurry, Harry. Don has some brilliant suggestion to make ; he always was smarter than the rest of us. ’

Laura giggled faintly, and then checked herself with a sigh. She was used to be amused by her brothers baiting Don, only now it seemed unfeeling to be amused at anything.

Mrs Grant bid Don irritably not to shuffle his feet, as if he were an overgrown child, which indeed he much resembled.

Miriam murmured something indistinct about

telegraph offices, and Ruth observed that, if Don had only listened to her, he might have been in a really good situation by this time. He might also have been the man in the moon, or the Great Mogul, as Ruth's advice was various, and not hampered by probability or even possibility.

'The furniture will have to be sold,' Harry continued, 'for what it will fetch,' tilting his chair back, and flicking contemptuously at the shabby curtains. 'I understand that there are a good many outstanding bills. It does seem to me extraordinary that my father could not have managed better on his income.'

It was the first word of blame on the dead man, and Don turned almost fiercely, as if he would have forced his brother to take back the charge of bad management, and he looked nervously at his mother, thinking she would be hurt and indignant.

But she, poor woman, was only too glad that the charge of bad management and extravagance was not made directly to her, and not even death could take away the habit of many years' standing, of throwing the blame on her husband while carefully reserving all the praise for herself.

'Your poor, dear father was always so easy-going and generous to a fault. Often and often I've told him that over-generosity was really dishonesty, but he never would listen to me, and the poor people knew how

weak he was, and could get round him and wheedle him out of all sorts of things. I'm sure I did my best, but I could not always be at his elbow, and Don just takes after him. Why, you'd think I was made of beef-tea and milk to hear them both when there was typhoid in the place. They didn't seem to think there was such a thing as expense to be thought of, if Dick, Tom, or Harry was ill, and wanted for anything. Men are so inconsiderate!'

'I expect the dilapidations will run into a pretty round sum. If my advice had been listened to, or if any one had had a happorth of sense, they'd have had the house seen to from time to time, before it got into such a state. Why, there's a crack in the wall by the back door that you could put a couple of fingers in, and the inspector will be down on us to-morrow and make out a list of dilapidations as long as my arm, and who's to pay, I should like to know? Why, it seems to me that people think they are going to live for ever, the way they go on without a thought of what's to be done at their death.'

Harry was waxing quite eloquent on people's improvidence, and as he was clerk at an insurance office, perhaps he had learnt at an early age the uncertainty of life, and the wisdom of providing for the future.

'As to the tradesmen's books, they'll have to wait,

and serve them right. I daresay they've put it on pretty thick; the prices they ask are simply outrageous. *I* won't pay them, and I tell them so, and if they won't come to my terms, I tell them I'll go elsewhere. But here's the butcher's book been running for a twelvemonth and more, and then only something paid on account, and I'll wager there's not been any check kept on it, but they've stuck it down just as they pleased, under weight, and bone and fat weighed in, and all the rest of it. Not even added up right, I'll be bound! Let's see. There!—after hasty addition of a column of indistinct figures—'three farthings too much, and all the rest to match, no doubt. But as there isn't much chance of his getting the money, it's not worth while showing him up, the scamp! so we'd better save our powder for what we shall be obliged to settle. One of the girls, or Don there, had better go round and see him, and say it shall be settled as soon as we can see where we are a bit. He's a churchman, isn't he? Used to be churchwarden years ago. Dead, is he? All the better; Don will be able to manage the widow with some of his pretty, little speeches.'

There was a general laugh at this; even Mrs Grant, who had subsided into her black-edged pocket-handkerchief when the butcher's book came under discussion, smiled a little, wintry smile, while Don flushed a dusky red, not at the joke made on his inelegant

manners, which he was well used to, but with a hot indignation for kind, anxious, little Mrs Perkins, carrying on her husband's business at sad odds, with a lazy, drinking son to harass rather than help her, with memories of modest apologetic appeals for settlement, met with excuses that were very bitter to Don's lips when he was the bearer of them, and of only last week (could it only have been a week ago?) her running over in the rain with a shawl thrown over her head, to bring a sweetbread she thought the vicar might fancy.

But meanwhile Harry was going on.

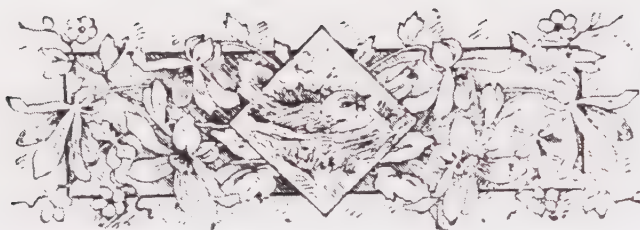
'Baker's a baptist, isn't he? We shall find him harder to engineer, but I think a little soft sawder will keep them all quiet for a bit anyhow. So that will be your part of the business, Don, as you're so keen on making yourself useful.'

I don't know if any of the rest of the family felt as sick at heart as Don did while this talk went on, first Harry, and then George, suggesting what seemed to Don mean and shabby and unworthy means of dealing with honest, kindly, old friends, and not hesitating to cast blame on the father whose presence seemed still to pervade the room, though, if the shutters had not been closed, you still might have made out the glimmering white of the wreaths on his grave.

I do not know why Don should have been different from the others, seeing he came of the same stock, and

had grown up pretty much in the same surroundings, but even the girls smiled, and sighed, and agreed, and Mrs Grant did not protest at things that revolted Don, great, clumsy lout as he was. Was it the love of nature that had kept his heart softer and purer and truer and more wholesome? Nature has a wonderful influence in that way on 'all them that have pleasure therein.' Or was it his association with little Sybil, to which both then, and all his life, he attributed whatsoever things were good, whatsoever things were pure, whatsoever things were holy in his life? Or was it, as Sybil would have explained it simply, because he was Don? his mere personality being enough to explain his superiority to other people.





CHAPTER XI.

AN OPENING.

Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant !
Let the dead past bury its dead !
Act—act in the living Present !
Heart within, and God o'erhead.

LONGFELLOW.



HERE was sunshine next day, and sunshine in November can be very beautiful, shining through the moist air and the soft brown of the yet clinging leaves, or on the drops that gem the bare branches, and bringing out the purple tints on the distant copses, with a patch of obstinate oak here and there keeping its leaves in spite of frost and winter winds, or on a hawthorn covered with crimson berries.

The wreaths on the new-made grave are dragged and forlorn, and the trampled turf round has not recovered itself, but Don notices, as he passes, that there is a little, fresh bunch of chrysanthemums put

there this morning, chrysanthemums which he last saw on a much-treasured bush in Miss Whateley's garden.

Mrs Grant had commented a little sharply on the fact that there had been no wreath from Miss Whateley, with a suitably-inscribed card of regret or esteem, but Don knew that she and Sybil had dropped flowers into the grave, not bought at a florist's, but cherished and cared for as few florists' flowers can be, and wet with tears of real, sincere, loving regret.

And now, among the withered, dragged 'floral tributes,' the little posy showed fresh and bright in the sunshine, cheering Don's sore heart with an indefinite feeling of something living and lasting, instead of everything being dead and withered and unreal and hollow.

But Don did not linger by the graveside. He had something to do that morning, which he had determined on in the course of an unusually sleepless night; and when he had done his usual household duties, pumping water, filling coal-scuttles, cleaning boots and knives, he set off on his business, taking a crust of bread in his hand to eat as he went along, not waiting, I am sorry to say, for the function of family prayers, conducted by Harry, who assumed the office as eldest of the family, but who, being unaccustomed to such ministrations, and being nervous in the performance of them, made all sorts of peculiar mistakes, very upsetting to his

congregation, especially to Laura, who was of a giggling nature verging on the hysterical.

Don's absence from prayers and breakfast was commented on by the brothers, Harry, meanwhile, contemplating admiringly his shining boot, which owed its polish to Don's exertions, while George prepared to cut the ham with the knife the same hands had cleaned.

'Where is that lazy fellow, Don? Does he generally stop in bed half the morning?'

And though all the sisters, and Mrs Grant as well, knew this was not the case, no one took the trouble to inform him that Don had got through a good deal of very necessary work before their hot water had been brought, and Louisa had tapped at their doors and said, 'Eight o'clock. Your hot water, please, sir.'

Don had not, it need hardly be said, started off on his unpleasant errand of cajoling the tradespeople, though his purpose was not entirely unconnected with that, seeing that his indignation and repugnance to the idea had gone some way to lead him to this determination.

Anyone could have seen that he had some fixed purpose, even from the way he walked, for, from his objectless, desultory life, he had contracted a slouching gait, which his family justly derided. But he stepped out now in very different style, so that, as he passed Miss Whateley's house, that lady looked twice at him

before she recognised him, being still more uncertain from the fact that he strode on straight past her gate, without even slackening his pace or turning his head, and, had not Sybil started out and caught him by the arm, and walked a little way along the street with him, regardless of having nothing on her head, Miss Whateley would have thought it was some strange young man, and not Don at all, so unusual was such behaviour.

‘Why, what’s come to the boy?’ she asked, when Sybil ran back.

‘He’s got something in his head, Auntie, and he’s coming in this evening to tell us all about it. It’s something to do with Colonel Oliphant, for he said he must get to Southerby in time to catch him before he started out after breakfast.’

‘Whatever can it be?’ Miss Whateley wondered at intervals all day, and Sybil wondered too, only she kept it to herself.

Colonel Oliphant was one of the principal landowners of the neighbourhood. He lived at Southerby Park, about four miles from Hayhurst, and owned most of the farms round the place that did not belong to Lord Billington, who was lord of the manor of Hayhurst. As the present lord, however, was under age, and old Lady Billington, his grandmother, did not often come to Billington Hall—his father having died while he was still a child—Colonel Oliphant reigned supreme as the

local magnate, representing the betters to whom the children of Hayhurst school were instructed to order themselves lowly and reverently, and was credited in the minds of Hayhurst folk with being possessed of unlimited power both for good and evil.

He was a pleasant, good-natured sort of man, blustering sometimes, and giving people the rough side of his tongue, but always ready with half-a-crown to salve the wound that rough side gave, and it is interesting to notice, sometimes, the healing properties of half-a-crown.

He was a justice of the peace, and culprits always hoped that he would be on the bench if they were brought before it, as he was leniently inclined to most offences, and many an evildoer owed to Colonel Oliphant the escape from punishment that very likely he richly deserved, and lived a better man ever afterwards, or continued the downward course that timely correction might have checked, and I am afraid Colonel Oliphant's leniency oftener produced the latter result than the former.

The one offence for which Colonel Oliphant felt no pity was poaching, for pheasants were his weak point, and the coverts of Southerby his pride and delight, and the disgraceful condition of the Billington preserves was his favourite topic for after-dinner conversation, on which he was never tired of holding forth.

Mrs Oliphant used to say that it took her all her time to prevent her husband interfering in Billington matters, and I am afraid it would have gone hard with any of the Billington keepers if, at any time, they had come within the arm of the law, and had been brought up before Colonel Oliphant. Colonel Oliphant only wished they would, but neither as prisoner nor witness did they come before him, for, though the Billington preserves were poached through and through, no one was ever caught at it, which favoured the colonel's openly-expressed opinion that the keepers winked at it, and never found what they did not look for.

West, of whom mention has been made as being a friend of Don's, and taking him part of the way to Colcroft, was Colonel Oliphant's keeper, and, in his master's opinion, the very best keeper that ever drew breath, and in his own opinion too. So no one ventured to suggest in Colonel Oliphant's hearing that West was not quite as young as he had been, which is a very self-evident assertion about all of us, and yet gives a good deal of offence, especially when youth is some way behind you.

Also, that he was a little bit rheumatic, which is not an unusual result of night-watching and exposure, and also that he was a trifle deaf, though I should not like to be the man to tell him so.

But even if he had been as old as Methuselah, and

twice as stiff in the knees, and double as hard of hearing, he would still have been worth his weight in gold, being first-rate in breaking-in dogs, his pointers having quite a wide reputation, and his retrievers not being far behind them, and having special methods of his own in raising pheasants, over which he was very knowing, and would not let even his master into his secret, which Colonel Oliphant did not mind, as long as his coverts were well stocked, and he could give his friends as good a day's shooting as could be met with anywhere.

But the question of West's ageing had been brought home to Colonel Oliphant's unwilling mind that very morning after Mr Grant's funeral, and as he stood in front of the dining-room fire, with his hands under his coat-tails, warming himself before the fire, this was the subject that knitted his brows together so fiercely, and caused such fidgety settling of his chin into his shirt-collar.

One of the under-keepers had given notice to leave the day before, a likely young fellow enough, Woodruffe, who had married one of Mrs Oliphant's maids, so she was sure to take his part against old West, and there was a baby there too, and that, Colonel Oliphant knew, would make every woman about the place take Woodruffe's side, even if he were altogether evidently in the wrong, which Colonel Oliphant could not be sure that he was.

But he was quite sure that West was too valuable to part with, even if he were wrong a dozen times over, and just now especially, with half a dozen shooting parties coming on. He must try and get Woodruffe another situation, and find someone in his place who would have more patience with the old man, and not mind bearing the blame when anything went a little bit wrong from a fault of memory, or hearing, or quickness of movement.

‘I wouldn’t mind,’ thought the colonel, musingly, ‘giving more money to someone who’d just come behind old West, and bolster him up for a few more years, and get into his ways, and be ready to slip into his shoes when the old chap drops off. Woodruffe hadn’t the making of a head keeper, in spite of his having married Mary Anne, and having such an uncommonly nice baby, which my wife thinks fits him for any position in life from archbishop downwards—I was going to say pope, only Mary Anne and the baby might not be a recommendation there.’

He was still chuckling to himself over this little mental joke when the butler came in.

‘Someone to see me, Bates?’

‘Yes, sir, I’ve shown him into your room, sir.’

‘Who is it?’

‘It’s young Mr Grant, sir, from the Vicarage.’

‘Ah, poor lad!—Well, Bates, what’s the joke?’

For Bates, being an old and privileged servant, did not think it necessary to prevent a little bubble of amusement from appearing on a usually rigidly placid and inexpressive surface.

‘Beg your pardon, sir, but he is a curious young gentleman, Master Don. He said I was to give you his respects, and say Don Grant would be glad to speak to you, and he wouldn’t sit down, but stood by the door like one of the village lads.’

‘Why, what’s the matter with the boy?’ Colonel Oliphant said, just as Miss Whateley had done half an hour before, as he made his way to his magistrate’s room, where Don awaited him.





CHAPTER XII.

THE MAN FOR THE PLACE.

Art thou poor? yet hast thou golden slumbers,
O sweet content!

Art thou rich? yet is thy mind perplexed,
O punishment!

Work apace, work apace, work apace,
Honest labour bears a lovely face.

T. DEKKER.



O you really understand what you are doing, Don?' Colonel Oliphant said, a few minutes later.

He was looking kindly at the lad, as if he were a little bit sorry and a little bit proud of him, and he was drumming his fingers reflectively on the wooden arms of his chair, as if he were debating something in his own mind. 'It's a step you ought to consider well before you take it. What do Mrs Grant and your brothers say to it?'

'I have been considering it all night,' Don answered. He was still standing, as Bates had described, near

the door, with his hat in his hand, though Colonel Oliphant had bidden him be seated when he came in, and he had apparently not seen the colonel's proffered hand, but had put his forefinger to his forehead in clumsy, yokel fashion, that had shocked the colonel, who had not seen much of him lately, and set it down to the demoralising effects of consorting entirely with the villagers—a parson's son, too!

But when Don opened his errand, Colonel Oliphant began to understand that the manner was assumed, as being more in accordance with his future position, for Don had come to apply for the situation of game-keeper.

Even amidst the engrossing occupation of his father's illness, rumours had reached Don's ears of a serious falling-out between West and Woodruffe, and in his bitter and humiliating cogitations of the night before, in which he seemed to be a helpless incapable, fated to be only a burden and irritation to his family, this had suddenly occurred to his mind as something he could do as well, if not better, than most people, and earn an honest living by work that he really had a liking for, and had done for the love of the thing often and often. Yes, and more than that, he could offer a home to his mother, if she would deign to accept it, which was more than either of his brothers could do, and this he honestly and simply thought, without any lurking

suspicion, that they might have done it if they had had a mind to.

Woodruffe's cottage was a pretty, little place, standing just at the edge of the park, among the woods, by itself. There was nothing 'poor persony' about it; a lady, so it seemed to Don's humble mind, might be every bit a lady in it, with a servant to wait on her, and a nice little bit of garden. Sybil and Miss Whateley always said they should like to live in it. And, more than that still, though he did not know what the wages were, he could not help thinking that, by rigid economy, by working early and late, and saving every penny, these bills of his father's might be paid off by degrees—not very soon, of course, but after a while—and they were all so kind; even the dissenting baker, from whom Harry had anticipated trouble, would be willing to give him time, and some day the name of the kind, old father would be cleared, and no one would have a word to say of him but praise and affection.

Whoever would have thought that Don possessed such romantic, high-flown notions of honour and honesty? How Harry and George would have laughed at such Quixotic ideas, and all growing out of an under-keeper's place on eighteen shillings a week.

Do you really understand what you are doing, Don ?'

'Yes, I am giving up all idea of being a gentleman.'
('Does it matter, Don ?' 'What? The puddle?' 'No,

being a gentleman?') 'I don't think I'm giving up much, for I don't see much chance of my being one anyhow. You see, I've had next to no education. Oh, it's all my own fault,' quickly, for no blame must be cast on the dead. 'I've been idle and careless, and I've just missed my chance of it. I can just read and write tolerably, and do easy sums. That's the long and the short of it, but I fancy it's enough for keeping. I shan't be stuck-up and give myself airs. I'll keep my place, and touch my hat to the quality. I don't feel as if there was much pride in me. And I shan't be above my work. I've done plenty of dirty work, and plenty of hard work, too, in my time, as you can see by those,' he said, stretching out a pair of big, hard-worked hands. 'My brothers Harry and George were chaffing me about them last night. They're not the hands of a gentleman, but they're honest hands, and perhaps that's better, and they can do your work all the better because they're not white and dainty, and used to wearing gloves.'

'You'll get rubs, lad. There are some men mean hounds enough to hector and bully all the more because they've heard you're a parson's son, and a gentleman born.'

'Let 'em,' said Don, grimly.

'Now, look here,' the colonel said, 'I don't half like it, and yet you're just the man I want. I don't see

why a man shouldn't do what you propose without letting himself down in his own or other people's estimation. There are hundreds of young men go to California, or New Zealand, or where you like, and turn their hands to any work that offers, and jolly rough work it is sometimes, I reckon, and they come back rather proud of it than otherwise. But in England it's different somehow. It's most unreasonable that it should be so, but so it is, and you must make up your mind, young fellow, to a good deal of nasty treatment one way and another.'

A shrug of Don's broad shoulders expressed entire indifference to public opinion.

'It's all very well just now, but by-and-bye, when there's a girl in the question—there's not one yet, eh?—you'll sing a different tune. You'll look for a wife in your own rank,—at least, if you're the lad I take you for, you will,—and how will she look at a gamekeeper, and, worse still, how will her people look?'

Another shrug. There was not a petticoat Don had ever thought of except little Sybil, who was little more than a baby yet, or Miss Whateley, who was an old maid. So Colonel Oliphant's warnings in this direction did not produce much impression.

'You know that some of the men that come shooting with me are not over choice when they're in the thick of it, and I'm not sure that I am myself. I wouldn't

be answerable that I'd always mind my manners, and if you didn't happen to be in the right place, or anything went a bit crooked, I'd as likely as not black-guard you finely, without stopping to think that your father was my old friend, who had sat at my table and drunk a glass of port with me many a time.'

'I don't want you to remember,' Don burst in. 'I'm not come to offer for the keeper's place because of my father, but in spite of him. Because I can do Woodruffe's work better than he ever did, and get on with old West, and be a good servant to you—sir.'

The 'sir' came out with a little difficulty, and did not naturally round off the sentence as it should in his new position.

'You know Woodruffe's cottage? I'll have it tidied up a bit before you go into it.'

Don's face brightened, this looked like business.

'It's a bit lonely there if you're living by yourself.'

'I thought perhaps my mother would live with me.'

The colonel gave a prolonged whistle of dismay. This rather altered the position, and he was not quite sure how it would do to have Mrs Grant, to whom he had never much taken, doing the refined and elegant fine lady at the keeper's cottage.

'Bless my soul!' said the colonel. 'I didn't think of that.'

Would Mrs Oliphant be expected to keep up the

ceremonious calling on Mrs Grant that had been the rule hitherto, neither calling out of turn, and leaving cards when the other was out? Would she have to be invited to garden-parties or other entertainments? This certainly was a complication, and she had already, on more than one occasion, shown herself thin-skinned and easily offended, and inclined to think herself slighted as the vicar's wife, and how would it be as the keeper's mother?

'I've not said anything to her yet,' Don said, 'and perhaps she may not wish it.'

'Perhaps not,' said the colonel, with very evident relief in his face.

'Indeed,' went on Don, 'I've not told any of them that I was coming to offer for the place. I daresay they won't like it, but it can't be helped. They can turn their back on me if they like. I don't wish to pull them down. I'd change my name if they like, but everyone here will know who I am, so it wouldn't be much good. They always said I was a disgrace to them, so it won't be anything new.'

'Well, you'd better go and talk it all over with them. As far as I'm concerned, you're welcome to the place, and I can't see why there need be any disgrace about it, as long as you don't get into low company, and keep steady and do your work honestly. Why, half the work is done by lots of young country gentlemen just for

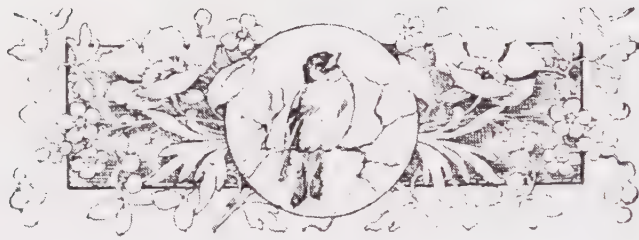
pleasure,—breaking in the dogs, ferreting and snaring, yes, and watching and having a brush with the poachers. They think it all good fun, so where's the difference, if you do the same to earn your living? I'd a lot rather do it myself than sit at a desk and drive a quill from morning to night, which is what your brothers would reckon gentlemanly work. But anyhow, go and talk it over, and come up to me again to-morrow, and I'll not tell anyone what's the notion, but just let West know I've a new keeper in my eye that I think will suit him down to the ground. And I'll look about for a place for Woodruffe. I don't know what my wife will say to his going. She's terribly keen after that baby.'

The talk then turned to the more technical parts of a keeper's duties, which would hardly interest the reader, even if I were capable of recording them accurately; but Don showed himself so intelligent, and to have such a close acquaintance with the coverts and corners of Southerby, and of West's strong points and weaknesses, that Colonel Oliphant felt more and more taken with the notion of the gentleman-keeper, and the conversation went on so long that it was interrupted by the luncheon-gong, that only having the power to stop the colonel when he was once mounted on his hobby.

'Hullo!' he said. 'There's lunch. Come in and have ——'

But he stopped himself just in time to prevent himself from inviting his new keeper, in friendly fashion, in to lunch with his wife. And Don, though with a little laugh in the corner of his eye, pretended to be unconscious of the slip, and touched his forehead, and said 'Good morning, sir,' in very correct form.





CHAPTER XIII.

DISGRACE.

Let us be content in work
To do the thing we can, and not presume
To fret because it's little.

MRS BROWNING.



HARRY and George had both left by the morning's train for London before Don reached home, and Miriam was just leaving, feeling, poor soul, that even her very unenviable situation was to be preferred to that of her sisters, who had begun that dreary look-out for something to do, searching advertisements only to find what endless accomplishments and certificates, what a variety of languages, what musical ability, what Kindergarten experience were demanded, and what hundreds of accomplished, certificated, and generally capable people were apparently seeking situations in vain. Even old Miss Grumbleton was better than that, even constant nagging, disturbed nights, and stinted and begrudged

meals, even occasional insolence and personal rudeness, all was richly made up for on quarter-day by the £2, 10s., less laundress deducted, which Miriam put into her poor, little, lean purse, and closed it with a triumphant snap, hoping she was not getting mercenary and avaricious because she treasured this hard-earned wage (she called it salary).

She knew that some day she would be cast off like an old glove; she several times already had trembled when Miss Grumbleton had praised someone younger, brighter, more cheerful and lively than herself, and she had made pitiful efforts to be bright and lively and girlish, which I need hardly say were a great failure. But, at any rate, to-day she felt in a superior position to Laura and Ruth, seeing that she had a roof to cover her, and food—of sorts—that she earned, and coin of the realm coming to her on quarter-day, and she assumed a patronising air to her sisters, and promised to mention them to Miss Grumbleton and her friends, and Laura and Ruth hardly knew how to take the patronage, having always hitherto considered themselves vastly superior to poor Miriam, and worthy of better things, she being reckoned the pokey one of the family.

Laura and Ruth were going as far as Kingham with her, to see her off, a three miles' muddy walk being better than sticking in that dull, old house, with Mother in the

dumps, and Don looking as if it were wicked even to smile or speak above a whisper.

Don expected to have had his usual task of carrying the luggage, but that had gone on in Harry's fly, so he was left with his mother, and when he had had some dinner at the untidy table at which the others had been feeding, he found her sitting forlornly in the study, with a file of bills before her, which she turned over aimlessly.

The fire was not lighted, and the room looked dull and miserable, for the November sun is but a poor, churlish thing, and though it may shine for an hour or two, soon turns off sulky, and draws up the clouds round its sickly face, and the mists and fogs creep out and help it to make things miserable.

Don struck a match and set light to the badly-laid fire, notwithstanding his mother's protest.

'There, you needn't light that. If I am cold I can sit in the dining-room. It's no use making more expense when we can't pay half we owe. Well, as you've lighted it, you may as well make it burn'—as the damp wood spluttered and smoked, and prepared to smoulder out.

Now, if there was one thing Don could do it was to make a fire burn, and he quite enjoyed dealing with a refractory one. So he fetched some dry sticks and a few fir cones. He did not feel that the extravagance was sinful, because he had collected them all himself, and

Mrs Grant, even in her apathetic gloom, grew interested in his manœuvres, and in a few minutes there was quite a cheerful fire burning, and he drew up his mother's chair, and she turned her skirt back and settled her feet on the fender, and felt as nearly cosy as the melancholy circumstances would allow.

'It was a pity you were out all the morning, Don; your brothers were very much put out about it, and there were ever so many things I wanted you to see after for me. I've had a very kind letter from the bishop, speaking in very gratifying terms of your poor father. Your brothers say it's only humbug, but the bishop always did appreciate your father's good points, and he's often said to me how much he regretted that the business of the diocese prevented him from seeing more of him. He says he hopes I shall not hurry my departure, which is very kind and considerate of him, but he evidently expects me to leave as soon as possible, so as to have the house put in order for the new vicar by Christmas.'

'Where shall you go, mother?'

'Oh, it's all very well to ask that. Your brothers seemed to think it very extraordinary that I had not a regular plan of what I was going to do, but it's come upon me so suddenly. I never thought your poor father was going to die. I always thought I should be the first to go, with all my illness, and my weak heart, and everything. I've often thought what

he would do without *me*. I'm sure, when Laura was born, no one dreamt I should recover, and I said goodbye to every one, and told your father all I wanted done after I was gone. And now he's gone, that was always so strong, and hardly knew a day's illness except those bad colds in the head, and a touch of gout now and then. And every one turns on me and says, "Where shall you go, Mother, and what shall you do?" I might as well ask you, Don, where you will go, and what you will do when we're turned out of the old home, for I know no more than you do.'

'I know what I'm going to do.'

Mrs Grant turned and looked at Don in amazement. 'Well, if you're reckoning on that situation in George's office, it's not a bit of use your setting your heart upon it, for I don't believe he means to put himself the least out of the way to get it for you.'

'I went up to Southerby to see Colonel Oliphant this morning,' Don went on, doggedly.

'Oh, that's where you've been all the morning, and just the very thing I was going to propose myself. I was only just thinking, as you came in, that you should go up and see the colonel to-morrow. He'd be sure to have something to suggest, and he knows so many of the country gentry, that he must often hear of situations and openings for gentlemen's sons. Does he know of anything?'

‘Yes, there’s a situation.’

‘Bless my heart! Don, why didn’t you tell me before? Here your brothers have been saying all sorts of things against you, and me standing up for you as well as I could, and now, if Colonel Oliphant’s getting you into something, the tables’ll just be turned, and I shan’t be sorry,’ Mrs Grant said, leaning forward to lay her hand on Don’s arm, with sudden expansiveness; ‘for Harry and George always do think they’re in the right, and everyone else wrong, and I shan’t mind seeing them set down a little. Is it a secretaryship, or overseer to some property, or clerk to some estate agent?’

Don gave a great, gulping swallow, and bolted out the words ‘Under-keeper,’ as if they burnt his mouth, and then addressed himself with great assiduity to piling up the coal into an impossible pyramid, without looking at his mother, who let her dress slide down over her knees, and left it there exposed to the scorching of the fire, which is well-known to be detrimental to the well-being of crape.

There was a terrible silence, and it was only when Don, out of the corner of his eye, saw his mother’s handkerchief rising tremulously to her face, that he burst out, ‘I couldn’t think what to do, and I knew Woodruffe was leaving, and that I could do his work, and I’ve always got on with old West. So I went up and saw Colonel Oliphant, and applied for the situation.’

‘And may I ask what Colonel Oliphant said to such a ridiculous and degrading proposal?’

‘He didn’t think it was ridiculous or degrading, and he was awfully kind about it, and he said many young fellows went abroad and did all sorts of rough work and no one thought any the worse of them.’

‘It’s all very well for him to talk, but how would he like one of his sons to be a gamekeeper?—a dirty, disreputable, low, drinking fellow always about at night and getting into rows with the police.’

It need hardly be said that Mrs Grant was confusing poachers and keepers together.

‘I always did think Colonel Oliphant was absurdly stuck-up, thinking such a lot of himself and his family, as if they were made of different flesh and blood to other people. It’s like his insolence to propose to have one of my sons for his gamekeeper. Keeper indeed! A pretty notion!’

‘He did not propose it. I asked for the place.’

‘And I suppose it’s all over Hayhurst by this time, in everybody’s mouth, and I shall be pointed at as the mother of Colonel Oliphant’s under-keeper. Oh dear!’ sobbed Mrs Grant, ‘I’m sure I’ve had enough trouble and mortification without this!’

‘No one knows anything about it but me and Colonel Oliphant. He said I’d better talk it over with you before it was settled.’

‘Then I’ll write a note at once, and say it’s quite out of the question, and that we’ve not sunk as low as that.’

‘Mother!’

Don had always been treated as a child, expected to do as he was told, to come and go, do this or leave it undone, according to other people’s wishes, though they constantly twitted him with being a man and so big and strong. But now there seemed something different about him, and his expostulatory ‘Mother!’ which hitherto would have been simply disregarded, now made her pause as she reached after the deep-black-edged notepaper, and began composing a dignified reply, in which the trodden worm turned with a very sharp tooth on the trampler.

‘Mother,’ he said, ‘I’m sorry you take it in this way; but I’ve been thinking and thinking, and I don’t know what else I’m fit for. And it’s a nice, little house, with quite a good garden and all to itself, with no one to overlook it or interfere. And I thought, if you had some of your own things, and we made it pretty and nice, and you had Sarah Jones to wait on you, it wouldn’t be so bad, and you’d be near all your old friends——’

But there he had made a mistake. If it had been a lodge in some vast wilderness, Mrs Grant might have considered the subject, but at the suggestion of ‘old friends’ she shuddered, and caught herself back from

the momentary imagination of a cosy cottage sitting-room, with Sarah Jones, who was a particular crony of hers, bringing her a cup of tea, and just a whiff of jugged hare coming in as she opened the door of the trim, little kitchen. But the idea of 'friends'! Mrs Thomson, whom she had always rather patronised, coming and looking round with her double eye-glasses, and praising everything, with that insolent air of condescension which Mrs Grant had seen her assume to anyone she considered her inferior. The Miss Barkhams, whose father, everyone knows, kept a draper's shop in Kingham, attempting to be *kind* to her—kind! to her who had bought reels of cotton and yards of braid across their father's counter! No, Mrs Grant could not endure this: she would starve first.

'No, Don, you mustn't ask it of me. If you choose to degrade yourself, and drag your poor father's name in the dirt, I suppose no one can prevent you, but don't ask me to look on and see it. And what will your poor brothers say? It will pretty nearly break their hearts.'

Don had a dull, indefinite feeling that Harry's and George's hearts were made of tougher material than his mother gave them credit for, and that, as long as he did not come on them for help, they would not be too sensitive as to the means he used for being independent of them, but he kept these opinions to himself, and just

then the diocesan surveyor was announced, and Mrs Grant had to dry her eyes quickly, and straighten her widow's cap, which had tilted to one side in her agitation, and brace herself to have every crack and splinter and crumbling bit of plaster ruthlessly pointed out and jotted down in that hateful note-book.

'You must take him round outside, Don, and, for goodness sake! don't keep him standing longer than you can help in the back yard, or he'll see that dreadful crack by the back door.'





CHAPTER XIV.

A STEP UPWARDS.

Kind hearts are more than coronets,
And simple faith than Norman blood.

TENNYSON.



It was the very same day on which Don, in his mother's opinion, took this decided step down from the station of life to which it had pleased God to call him, that Sybil, entirely without malice prepense, made a step upwards.

She had been out in the afternoon with Miss Whateley, to see some poor man who lived about a mile out of Hayhurst, in the opposite direction to Colonel Oliphant's place, Southerby. Sybil had very much wished to have gone the other way, in the hope of meeting Don, and learning the mysterious errand that took him off in such a hurry in the morning that he could not even stop to speak to them, but most of Miss Whateley's *protégées* lived in the other direction, for what Colonel Oliphant

said about the Billington preserves might, and perhaps with more justice, be said of the cottages, that they were a disgrace to the county. And so, whenever some pale, ragged-looking woman, with a sickly baby in her arms, came to Miss Whateley's back door, or a sullen, dejected-looking man, it was sure to transpire that they lived in one of the wretched cottages on the Billington estate.

'And really,' Mrs Grant would say, 'it's not a bit of good relieving those people. The Billingtons ought to do it; if they let them live in cottages no better than pigsties, they ought to help them when they get the fever, which is the natural consequence.'

And Mrs Grant was quite right; so they ought, but, unfortunately, they left undone the things they ought to have done, as so many of us do, though we let the words trip off our tongues in the general confession without a thought of their awful meaning, the 'forasmuch as ye did it not.'

But the people learned by degrees that it was no use going to the Vicarage.

'They're not in our parish,' Mrs Grant would also declare, though, to be sure, the Syro-phœnician's plea for the dogs might have applied here. And they also learned that they were sure of a kindly hearing, and perhaps a bit of bread and cheese, or an oddly-made, little, warm, patchwork garment for the child at Miss

Whateley's back door, and that she would not let the matter rest there, but would come paddling over and let poor, dirty, slatternly Mrs Bets sob out some of the bitterness of a full heart, and the difficulty of making two ends meet with a drunken husband and five little steps. And she would lift one of the little, limp children on her lap, or stroke the baby's thin cheek with a finger in a tabby thread glove, and say, 'Dear, dear! poor things! dear me! dear me!'

Soft words butter no parsnips, they say, but if parsnips are the same as a dinner of herbs, love makes a deal of difference in the relish of them. And sometimes Bets would be at home, only half-sober, perhaps, and surly and quarrelsome, and 'the little steps' keeping well out of the reach of a heavy hand.

'I am afraid you are not feeling well,' Miss Whateley would say, looking down on him with those kind eyes of the pure in heart, which only see good here as they will see God hereafter. 'Will it disturb you if I read a little bit to your wife?'

I fancy he felt more ashamed of himself when he shouldered out of the cottage, with an oath, or turned a sulky shoulder and pretended to go to sleep, than he might have done at a temperance meeting.

I only give the Bets family as a typical instance of Miss Whateley's acquaintance on the Billington property, for, of course, the people's circumstances differed, and on

the afternoon after Mr Grant's funeral she was going to see a paralysed man, who used such profane language (poor thing!) that Miss Whateley would not allow Sybil to come in with her, 'though he does not know what he's saying, so it's not so bad as it would be in you or me, Sybby. It's really not much worse in him than in the parrots, which, I've been told, learn to swear dreadfully from the sailors on board ship, instead of saying "Poor Polly" and "Scratch poor Poll's poll," which comes natural to them, pretty creatures.'

I am afraid Sybil went away with a mistaken idea of parrots in the wild state, flying about in the tropical jungle, making those remarks; but I daresay we, many of us, even in adult years, have as incorrect ideas of tropical natural history, without taking the trouble to set ourselves right.

Sybil was to walk on along the lane by the side of which the swearing paralytic lived, only she was not to go out of sight; but as this was one of those long lanes that have no turning, Sybil strayed to a considerable distance without disobeying Miss Whateley's instructions, glancing back every now and then to make sure that the broken-down fence and tipsy-looking gate, hanging crookedly on one hinge, were still to be seen.

It had been, as most of these very straight roads and lanes were, cut across a piece of common land, subsequently enclosed, and on either side of the ratty

muddy track there was a broad margin of rough grass, and a tangle of blackberry and gorse and bracken, from among which Sybil collected bits of every imaginable shade, from pale lemon colour through gold and orange to brown and russet, and from the blackberry leaves quite vivid scarlet and crimson and purple, making altogether a wonderfully showy bouquet for dull November to boast of.

And then she espied in the hedge some scarlet hips, which would be a grand set-off to her nosegay, and to reach them she had to climb over a gate hard by, and, jumping down the other side, nearly jumped on to a girl who was sitting on a felled tree just inside the gate.

She was a girl of about the same age as Sybil,—not one of the village girls, Sybil saw at once, though she was very plainly dressed, and was not nearly as stylish as some of the tradesmen's children, at whom Sybil looked with respectful admiration. She had an odd, little, freckled face, and rather a wide mouth, that on this occasion was drooping at the corners with a desponding expression which did not look habitual to it, or to correspond with a pair of round, bright eyes like a robin's, full of quick observation and interest.

'Oh,' she said, 'how you startled me!'

'I'm very sorry,' said Sybil. 'I wanted to reach some berries, and I never thought of anyone being here.'

And do you know,' continued that officious young person, who had been longing to sit down herself, and debating if Auntie would be very angry if she did so, 'I don't think you ought to sit here; it's very damp, and you will catch cold. You know I don't much mind having a cold myself, because I have treacle-posset after I'm in bed at night, but I don't think it is fair to catch cold on purpose, though treacle-posset is lovely. Do you have treacle-posset when you have a cold?'

Sybil was decidedly friendly disposed, as may be seen, and inclined to be communicative.

The other girl had got up slowly at Sybil's suggestion, and was looking her over curiously, and, instead of answering the question, she asked in return, 'Do you live in those cottages over there? And have you got the fever? And is that why you take treacle what's its name?'

'I don't live in those cottages,' Sybil said, rather offended at its being supposed that she lived either with the profane paralytic or with the Bets family, whose cottage came next; 'I live at Hayhurst with Miss Whateley, and she's come over to see a poor man that lives there. He hasn't got the fever, though people often do who live in the Billington cottages, because they're so bad. Auntie says it's quite a disgrace, and Lord Billington ought to have them made clean and comfortable, but she says he's only a little boy,

and perhaps when he's grown-up he'll set it all right.'

'He's not such a very little boy,' the girl said; 'he's taller than I am.'

'Have you seen him, then?'

'Yes.'

'When?'

The little girl only laughed and looked mysterious, and when she laughed she looked quite different, for her whole face lighted up, and her eyes shone so radiantly that you forgot that the mouth was large and the face freckled. She touched the bunch of leaves in Sybil's hand, and said, 'How pretty! where did you get them?'

'Over in the lane there. Would you like to have them? Or will you come over into the lane and pick some there?'

'No, I mustn't go further than the gate, they said, because there was fever at the cottage there. But I don't think the fever can be worse than having something wrong with one's back. Have you got a straight back?'

'Yes, I think so,' Sybil said, rather nervously, feeling behind at the little, warm jacket, in case a hump like Punch's might have suddenly developed. 'Can you see anything wrong with it? Mrs Grant said that one of my shoulders was higher than the other.'

'Oh, I expect you're all right, and I believe I am too, only the doctors thought they must find out something to make a fuss about to satisfy Granny. But I'm not to do this, and I'm not to do that, and I'm to lie down, and such a fuss and bother about everything, I get quite out of patience. And it's awfully dull down here, and there's nobody I know, and Granny and Bill won't come down till Christmas, and that's weeks off.'

'Where are you living?'

'Oh, up there.' The girl pointed vaguely behind her to where Sybil could just see through the trees some roofs showing.

'What's your name?'

'Betty Brookfield.'

'Betty? What a funny name. I thought only housemaids in very old story-books like Auntie had when she was a very little girl were called Betty.'

'Oh, my real name is Elizabeth, but they always call me Betty. What's yours?'

'Sybil Harrington. It's rather a pretty name, isn't it? But (with a sudden remembrance of politeness) I daresay some people think Betty pretty too.'

'Couldn't you come over and play with me sometimes?'

'I'll ask Auntie,' Sybil said, rather doubtfully, remembering a sudden intimacy with a delightful gipsy which had been nipped in the bud. 'But

if you're ill she's sure to let me. She always goes to people who are ill, even if they keep a public-house. And she takes people puddings,' she went on reflectively, letting her eye wander over her new friend's plain, but certainly not poverty-stricken, appearance, uncertain whether a pudding would be acceptable in this case. 'But I've some nice books I could lend you, and—I suppose you don't care for dolls?' diffidently. 'Auntie says I'm getting too old for dolls, but—' with a quick consciousness of sympathy in the stranger's bright eyes and freckled face—'I *do* like a game with them sometimes, and Rosalind is still very nice, though her eyes don't quite open and shut properly.'

'When will you come? Come to-morrow, and bring the doll?'

'Oh, I don't know if Auntie could come so soon again. And there she is calling me,' Sybil said, tumbling over the stile in reckless haste. 'I'll tell her. She's sure to know where you live. She knows all the people about here. Good-bye.'

Miss Whateley's mind was sadly occupied with her unsatisfactory interview with the paralysed man, and she did not pay much attention at first to Sybil's breathless outpourings, but at last she became aware that someone had asked Sybil to go and see her.

'She's ill, Auntie, and has something wrong with her back, and has to lie down hours and hours all by

herself,' said Sybil, painting the lily freely to make out an enticing case to Miss Whateley's benevolent mind.

'Dear, dear! Who is she?'

'She's a little girl not much bigger than me.'

'Then it must be Angelina Norris, but she was at school yesterday, for she was behaving very rudely, and making a great noise, and I spoke to her about it, but she was quite well then.'

'Oh no, it's not Angelina, and she was a very nice little girl, and not at all rude.'

'It couldn't have been one of the Bets' family, they're all smaller; and the Smiths are boys. Did she tell you her name?'

'Yes, it was Betty, but I don't recollect the other name. Isn't Betty an odd name, like the servant in the *Fairchild Family*?'

'Betty?' said Miss Whateley, musingly. 'I don't seem to know the name anywhere about here, and all the people call their children such grand names nowadays; they're all Angelinas and Victorias and Alexandras, and in old times it used to be Mary and Betty and Ann, and much more sensible too. Where did she say she lived?'

'Oh, somewhere over the field beyond the lodge. It can't be far, for she says she must not walk much. She wasn't a common little girl at all, so I didn't like

to ask if she would like a pudding, but she talked of her granny, and her brother's name is Bill.'

Sybil felt that it sounded rather low altogether,—granny and Bill and Betty,—and her hopes of being allowed to go over and take Rosalind were becoming very faint.

'Whoever could she have been?' said Miss Whateley, reflectively. 'I know all the people who live about there.' And she ran over on her fingers the names, but Sybil shook her head at each.

'And there are no cottages beyond the lodge till you get to the Hall. Could it have been someone stopping with the housekeeper? And now I come to think of it, there's a new housekeeper up there that I don't know. Old Mrs Wood lived forty years in the service of the Brookfields——'

'Brookfield! that was the name. Betty Brookfield.'

Miss Whateley stopped dead short, and let the basket in her hand drop, and the tracts in it flutter out into the mud.

'Betty Brookfield! Why, then, it must have been little Lady Elizabeth, the sister of Lord Billington.'

'Bill!' ejaculated Sybil.

'And the granny she talked of must be the dowager countess, for they've lost both father and mother, poor children.'



CHAPTER XV.

UPHILL AND DOWNHILL.

For a' that, and a' that,
Our toils obscure, and a' that ;
The rank is but the guinea's stamp,
The man's the gowd for a' that.

BURNS.



MS GRANT was not too much engrossed in her own concerns just then, painfully enthralling as they were, not to comment severely on 'that child's artfulness in managing to strike up an acquaintance with Lady Billington's granddaughter, before that young lady had been a week at the Hall. With all Miss Whateley's apparent simplicity, and pretended indifference to rank, she knew which side her bread was buttered, and did not let such an opportunity slip, but managed cleverly to foster the friendship between the two children, till they became quite inseparable, and nothing would do but that Sybil, that little, upstart creature, daughter of

that wretched, swindling Tom Harrington, must be up at the Hall, morning, noon, and night, taking it all as coolly as if it were all hers by right, instead of her proper place being in the workhouse, as it was plain enough.'

I am afraid that this unexpected turn of good luck for little Sybil did much to embitter Mrs Grant's last days at Hayhurst; and I fear it is part of our poor human nature to resent good fortune befalling others when it seems scrupulously to avoid coming our way.

I don't think I need assure the reader that, as far as Miss Whateley was concerned, this intimacy was quite unsought, and, indeed, when she found out who it was with whom Sybil had made friends that day, she carefully abstained from going in that direction for some days, much to the wrath of the paralysed man, who became still more shockingly profane in his language, so that even the well-seasoned ears of his neighbours were offended by it.

Sybil, too, felt a little bit shy at the prospect of meeting Lady Betty again, as she had been tottering on the verge of offering a pudding all through their interview, and also made severe remarks about the state of the Billington property. But she did not torture herself on the subject as she would have done if she had been a few years older, in which case false shame would most likely have prevented any further

intercourse between the girls, but, in her heart, she rather hoped they might meet again, and she spent a good deal of time wondering about this Lady Betty, who bore no outward signs of exalted rank to distinguish her from the rest of the world.

She was not left long to wonder, for at the beginning of the following week came a note, brought over by one of the Billington grooms, and written in large, round hand in pencil, directed to Miss Sybil Harrington.

‘Dear Sybil,—When are you coming to see me? Granny says she hopes you will come. I have to lie down all day now.—Your affectionate friend, Betty. Bring the doll.’

There was also a letter from Lady Billington to Miss Whateley, regretting that she had not the pleasure of Miss Whateley’s acquaintance yet, though she hoped to make it when she came down at Christmas, but asking if she would allow her little niece to go over sometimes to play with her granddaughter, who, she was sorry to say, had a weakness in her spine which obliged her to lie down.

‘It is very wearisome for her, poor child, and it would be a great kindness if you would allow your little niece to go and help her pass the time. The children appear to have met in the fields one day, and Betty has been very full of her ever since. If her name is, as Betty says, Sybil Harrington, I think I must

remember her mother some years ago in London, a very charming person. The pony-carriage will call any time you like for your niece, and will bring her back when you wish.—Yours sincerely, Louisa Billington.'

Mrs Grant happened to be with Miss Whateley when these notes arrived. She observed, out of the corner of her eyes, that it was one of the Billington grooms who brought the note, but she would not make any remark on the fact, nor on the coat-of-arms on the envelope, at which Maria, who brought it in, stared agape.

It was beneath her dignity to show any of the curiosity that was gnawing her very vitals, but she could have shaken Miss Whateley for the deliberation with which she apologised for opening it, and then looked about for her spectacles.

'Tiresome, old thing! Why didn't she ask me to read it to her?'

And though she took up a book of family prayers off the table near her, and even hummed a tune to show how little interest she took in what was passing before her, she managed to make out the contents of the note, upside down, quite as soon as Miss Whateley did, and found it quite difficult to listen to Miss Whateley's explanations with decent patience, before bursting out, 'Of course you won't let her go!'

'Do you think she had better not?'

Happily, Sybil was not present, or I am afraid Mrs

Grant might have had a convincing proof of her theory, that Sybil was a spoilt, self-willed, pert, little thing.

‘Well, of course you can do as you like, but I call it most impertinent to ask the child without inviting you. I have always heard that Lady Billington is most insolent in her behaviour to those she considers her inferiors.’

Mrs Grant meant this as a snub to Miss Whateley, but it was quite lost upon that lady, who never for a moment thought herself on an equality with a countess.

‘I don’t think she means to be rude or unkind, and I’m sure I don’t at all want to go, and the poor little girl is ill, and Sybby will be so pleased.’

‘Oh yes! of course Sybil’s pleasure is the only thing to be considered, but I think, Miss Whateley, that it is a great pity to let children toady their betters. I always tried to teach mine to be independent, but—oh dear!’—with a sudden memory of that black sheep, Don, who was by this time finally engaged as under-keeper to Colonel Oliphant,—‘it’s a funny world with its ups and downs, and I think I must be going home now, and I won’t detain you from answering your *friend’s* note,’ with a withering emphasis on *friend*. And she swept past the groom holding the horse at the gate, looking, ‘for all the world,’ said the man, ‘as if I owed her a quarter’s rent.’

‘She wants everyone to see that man at the gate,’

Mrs Grant said, fretfully, when, ten minutes later, she happened to look out at her gate and saw he was still there. But, really, it was from no wish to advertise her new acquaintance with the aristocracy, but from searchings of heart as to whether she should let Sybil go, and the difficulty of ordering herself sufficiently lowly and reverently in writing to her betters; and I don't know how long the man might have waited, or how much more irritated Mrs Grant might have become from seeing him there, if Sybil had not come in, and, quickly gathering what had occurred, declared that it was lovely, and what time might she go?

‘But, Sybby, I am not sure about your going.’

‘But, Auntie, you let me go to little Winnie Leach at the farm when she broke her leg.’

‘Yes, yes, to be sure.’ One sick child is as good as another, even if she has the misfortune to have a title, so that simplified the question, and Miss Whateley let Sybil write an answer to Betty,—‘Dear Betty,—I will come at three. I shall like to very much. Your affectionate friend, Sybil,’—wondering, as she watched her write, whether Mrs Grant would consider it toadying, and feeling grievously afraid that Sybil's pride and delight at directing the envelope to Lady Elizabeth Brookfield might be set down to some contemptible feeling of the kind.

And at three a little governess cart, with a brisk

little pony, came to fetch Sybil, and whirled her off in triumph past the Vicarage windows, where, even with her back turned to the road, Mrs Grant was painfully conscious of what the rolling wheels and quick-trotting feet signified, even if her two daughters had not come in, proclaiming, 'Mother, we saw Sybil Harrington being driven in a little cart by a man in the Billington livery.'

'Oh, I daresay; it runs in the blood. That swindling father of hers had just that way of getting round people, and you see what he came to.'

'Whatever do you mean, mother? I only wish the Billingtons had taken a fancy to me. Wouldn't I have made up to them, if they'd only given me a chance.'

Mrs Grant turned from her daughter with a dignified shudder. There certainly was a touch of the brutal about Laura, just as there was in Don; she supposed they inherited it from their poor, dear father.

Miss Whateley had an uncomfortable afternoon, feeling acutely how much Mrs Grant would disapprove of her letting Sybil go, and uncertain as to whether it really was right to have done so.

It was quite a relief when, after tea, Don came in, to whom she could unburden her mind.

Poor Don was glad enough to get out of the way of his mother's reproaches and his sisters' sneers. There had been moments, now and then, when Mrs Grant, in

the inmost recesses of her heart, had entertained Don's proposal of a home for her in the keeper's cottage, when George and Harry's letters had been cold and discouraging, and shabby furnished lodgings had revealed themselves to her in all their dreary meanness.

Oddly enough, when she tried to realise the future, the thing she felt the most keenly, the thing that set her lips quivering, and sent her hand seeking wildly, though generally in vain, for her pocket-handkerchief, was the parting from Don. I don't think it was because he was her youngest, her baby, her Benjamin, though it is very difficult to analyse feelings; it was more the want of someone to fetch and carry, to endure unreasonable blame, and never expect thanks, who had not to be considered or amused.

If only she could have found moral courage to shake off the ridiculous trammels of pride and class distinction that held her back, and have let the mother's love that was there, I suspect, all the time, have its way, and just have put her arms round Don's neck and said, 'Don, if you'll give your poor, old mother a home, she will try her best to make it a happy one,' I think Mrs Grant might have been a happy, old woman, and have tyrannised over Don to her heart's content to the end of her natural life. But she had not that moral strength, and, though it was the worse for her, I am not sure that it was not the happier for Don, who

would have been reduced to abject slavery by a couple of words of tenderness from his mother.

So that evening Don was glad to come in to Miss Whateley's fireside, and sit on the three-legged stool and listen to the gentle, old voice that did not sneer or sting. He was still sitting there, rather sleepy, perhaps, and not quite rigidly attentive to Miss Whateley's soft, little stream of words, when Sybil returned, bright and excited, and full of her afternoon's doings at Billington Hall, and of her new friend; kneeling in front of Miss Whateley, and pouring out such a flood of delighted description that neither Miss Whateley nor Don could have edged in a word, even if they had had a mind to.

'She wants me to come every day, but I told her I was sure you could not spare me, and that, of course, I had to do my lessons. And then she said she wished I would come and do lessons with her. There's Mademoiselle, you know, the French governess, who speaks so funny when she tries to speak English, and Betty says that, after Christmas, she's to have masters for all sorts of things, and that it's horrid doing lessons by herself.'

Miss Whateley drew a long breath. She had a leisurely old mind, used to taking things quietly, and when events began to proceed with leaps and bounds, they rather took her breath away. Sybil's lessons had

been becoming more and more of a difficulty with the old lady. She was very distrustful of her own pronunciation of French, and arithmetic always had been a difficulty with her, and she had to work out beforehand the sums Sybil was doing, as, though there were the answers at the end of the book, she could not always bring the working-out honestly to the same result.

She was too honest to pretend to any knowledge she did not possess, and so was unable to keep up the *prestige* supposed to be necessary in a teacher, though I am not sure that a straightforward admission of ignorance does not produce more respect in the mind of the inquirer than a superficial, bungling explanation, that an intelligent pupil soon finds out to be humbug.

Sybil had a very inquiring nature, and her inability to answer the child's questions often preyed on Miss Whateley's mind, and she had sometimes anxious debates in her mind whether something could not be screwed out of her very small income to expend on education.

And here, all of a sudden, without any seeking of her own, or the slightest economy, without even striking a halfpenny off the butcher's book, or shortening the amount of coals or candles, the way was opened, the gates of the temple of learning were set wide for little Sybil to walk in.

Miss Whateley had been used all her life to get everything, metaphorically, by the sweat of her brow, and sometimes, indeed, *vide* her garden, physically so, and to have a piece of good fortune plumped down in front of her like this was quite alarming, and made her nervous and uncomfortable.

‘She is going to write to her grandmother,’ Sybil went on, ‘and she will write to you about it. I said I always did my lessons with you, and I didn’t want any other teacher.’

She was up on Miss Whateley’s lap by this time, still a very usual seat, though she was getting such a big girl, and she was arranging Miss Whateley’s capstrings, which always required attention when any very confidential talk was going on, and they neither of them were aware that Don had got up quietly and gone out, though he was so big, and his movements generally so awkward, that he could not often do anything unnoticed.

He was feeling a little bit heartsore and out of it. This sudden introduction of countesses and titles on the scene made the under-keeper to Colonel Oliphant feel a little out of his element, and he hated himself for being so, and for not being able to be simply pleased at this small bit of brightness that had fallen across the pathway of his little friend.

It was very dark and drizzling outside, and he

strode along the muddy road feeling very lonely and dreary.

The Vicarage gate was off its hinges (everything was that night), and Don had a trouble to make it shut, but, if it had not been for the delay, he would not have been overtaken by the quickly-running little feet, and his arm clutched tightly by Sybil's hands, as she clung to him, out of breath with her run and frightened by the darkness.

'And oh! Don, I've lost my shoe in the mud as I came along, so you'll just have to carry me back, for it's so dark we shall never find it to-night.'

So Don carried her back as he had done the first day of their acquaintance, and as he had most of the long nine miles from Colcroft.

'What did you go off like that for?' she said, as they went, and her arms were round his neck. 'Wicked, unkind Don! when I had so much to tell you!'

'I thought you didn't want me.'

'Rubbish.'



CHAPTER XVI.

AFTER EIGHT YEARS.

For the look of her,
The look of her
Comes back on me to-day,—
With the eyes of her,
The eyes of her
That took me on the way.

MOIRA O'NEILL.



PASSED over five years earlier in my story, and now I must make another jump of eight years, only slightly recording the events that came to pass in that period.

It is not only in stories that these jumps occur. We meet with them in real life, for stirring episodes are of very occasional occurrence, and between them are days and weeks and months and even years, of uneventful time, of which there is little to record, but which make up the best and happiest part of our lives.

Eight years have elapsed since that November

evening, at least it will be eight come November, as the Hayhurst people say, for it is June now, and as lovely a June as you could well wish to see, all roses and sunshine and singing birds and sweet smells. It is early in the month, so haymaking is only just beginning here and there, and the broad meadows are swaying and rippling under the light, warm breeze with all sorts of soft colours of ripe grass and sorrel tips and buttercups. The trees have not yet lost their wonderful variety of tints to settle down into their midsummer monotony, and you can still hear, among the chorus of birds, the nightingale's long, soft note, and even the cuckoo now and then, much the same as it was in April, in spite of the saying, 'in June I change my tune.'

Miss Whateley's roses are really a sight to see this year, and many a passer-by stops to have a look at them. There is a special, sturdy, old, cabbage-rose bush near the kitchen window, that seems to have made up its mind to show the new, conceited, French-named varieties what a rose should be and was years ago before they were born or thought of, and how a rose should smell too, a smell to keep a sweet, grateful memory of till June comes round again, and you can bury your nose once more in the great, warm, pink freshness.

It was about such roses as these that poets wrote

and lovers sighed centuries before Maréchale Niel or Baronne Rothschild were invented.

I am not sure that all the admiring looks sent in the direction of that cabbage rose must be put to the credit of that bush, for the Maria of that period had a pair of rosy cheeks and bright eyes that attracted a good deal of sheepish admiration from passing carter boys and haymakers. And perhaps it was not only Maria, or the roses either, at whom admiring glances were directed, for Sybil, at seventeen, was as pretty a sight as you need wish to see.

As she stood in the garden that June morning, with a basket of roses in her hand, she looked like the incarnation of June, with the sunshine pouring down on her uncovered head, as if it loved to touch the ripples and curls of sunny hair. The washed-out print frock could not rob her slim, girlish figure of its grace, and her sweet, bright face had still the same radiant look of confident happiness that it had worn in her childhood, and that had often jarred on Mrs Grant as unsuitable in a swindler's child, who should by rights be in the workhouse. The soft tint of her cheek was just what you would find in a half-opened *Devoniensis*, while all the rest of her skin was creamy-white like *Niphetos*, to carry on the rose simile, an insolent fairness that defied constant exposure to the sun, and aroused envy and indignation in sunburnt and freckled maidens who

smothered themselves in veils and shady hats, and used all sorts of toilette appliances in vain.

But I think it was her eyes that gave the chief charm to Sybil's face; they were grey, with dark rings in them, and surrounded by thick, curled lashes, several shades darker than her hair; sweet, simple eyes, utterly unconscious of their own loveliness, without a trick, or pretence, or affectation about them, so fearlessly true, so sunny and happy and radiant, that they almost made you forget when you looked at them that there could be such things as sorrow, or deceit, or bitter tears, or heartbreak.

Miss Whateley, who, as we have seen in earlier years, was weakly affected by beauty of outward form, and had not grown hardened as she grew older, used to do her utmost to conceal her fervent admiration, and speak disparagingly of her darling.

'We mustn't make her vain, Don,' this very transparent, old deceiver would say, after belauding Miss Gregson's substantial charms, and regretting that Sybil's soft, curly hair did not grow in the solid door-mat that covered that young lady's swarthy brow, and could not be arranged in the enormous bun that adorned her poll.

'And, my dear, you will never be half as good-looking as your mother was, even if you live to be a hundred.'

If beauty, as might have been opined from Miss Whateley's remark, increases with advancing years, Miss Whateley herself ought to have increased in comeliness since my story began, but truth compels me to state that there was very little difference one way or the other, and that, when the farmers, riding through Hayhurst on market day, nodded to her and said, 'Mornin', mum. Why, you don't look a day older, Miss Whateley, as I can mind you this twenty years,' they were not far wrong, though they would have said it just the same if they had been. She was well over the threescore years and ten by this time, getting on for the fourscore years, when, as the Psalmist tells us, strength is but labour and sorrow, and she sometimes felt that she ought to feel it so more, instead of getting such a lot of pleasure out of life still, out of her roses and Sybil, and dozens of other things which made her forget how old she was.

Once, when she was not very well (I think her liver was a little out of order, and she wanted a tonic), she declared that it was not right for an old woman like herself to be so taken up with gardening. She could not help thinking of those petunias all the time she was saying her prayers that morning, so she meant to give it up entirely, and have in Briscoe, the man with a wooden leg, from the John Barleycorn, once a week to do the garden, and she got out a very dull, religious

book to read after tea, instead of turning out, as she and Sybil always did in the cool of the evening, to carry on little works of weeding and transplanting and training and watering.

Sybil was greatly distressed at this determination, but she felt more hopeful when, ten minutes later, she caught her aunt flicking off some blight from the rose branches by the parlour window; and when the girl discovered a perfect colony of snails in a snug corner by the wall, and called on Miss Whateley for assistance in despatching them, that lady flew to her aid without a thought of her own latter end and suitable preparations for the same, being too much bent on hastening the latter end of the snails with a firm, crushing heel on the gravel path. She put down the religious work on the first place that offered, which happened to be the garden roller, behind which the volume slipped down, and was not found till a week later, seriously damaged by damp, and infested by earwigs, and the distressing part of the business, to Miss Whateley's mind, was that she did not even miss the book till it was discovered.

I fancy that Mrs Grant was actually an older woman than Miss Whateley, both in mind and body, though, when the census came round, she truthfully put twenty years less than Miss Whateley did, for age is certainly not a matter of time, and I have known

people who actually grew younger with advancing years, and perennial youth is not so uncommon a gift as Vertumnus thought when he gave it to his love Pomona.

But Mrs Grant had never come back to Hayhurst since she left it, eight years before, though she still kept up a correspondence with Miss Whateley of a voluminous description, containing a good many reflections on the wickedness of the world and the selfishness of its inhabitants, and her own desolate and forlorn condition, and the terrible disgrace that had befallen the family through that miserable boy Donald, though she never mentioned the remittances which that miserable boy sent her from time to time, and which Miss Whateley and Sybil darkly suspected, though they could never induce Don to confess to them.

For Don is still Colonel Oliphant's keeper, head-keeper now, and one whose praises Colonel Oliphant is never tired of singing, dinning it into the ears of the country round till they are sick of the subject, and wish that Colonel Oliphant would keep his gentleman-keeper to himself. Talk of ladies discussing the merits of their maids! they are nothing compared to the men over their grooms and keepers.

And Colonel Oliphant, in the course of time, had honestly persuaded himself that Don's taking up this position was entirely his, Colonel Oliphant's, idea, and

he gave quite a pathetic account of the lad's grief at his father's death, and of his own advice to him to take up the work that offered, and not to be above any honest employment.

'And the very next day, sir, I had to give one of my keepers the sack, and I offered his place to young Grant, never dreaming he'd take it, and, by Jove! he caught at it, and I've never regretted my offer, and I don't think he has accepting it.'

Old West made it a little bit hard for Don at first, though, in his crusty old heart, he was secretly pleased, and he soon found the comfort of the new arrangement, and managed to shunt a good share of his work on Don's willing young shoulders. But for some time he kept up an outward appearance of disapproval and disbelief in 'such an unnatural state of things holding water,' and he was always ready with cutting remarks about fine gentlemen, and soiling his hands, and playing at work, till Don was driven to work harder, and do dirtier work, and assume a roughness of manners and language that did not come natural to him.

He made Don feel that it was a very different thing doing amateur keeper, and helping with the watching for nothing but the fun of it, to doing it as regular, paid for work, earning honest wages, and he would spare him in no possible way, as he would have spared any other under-keeper as young as Don.

He also constantly kept up the fiction for some time that there was another chap he knew as would have been just the man for the place, and have been a down-right help instead of a hindrance.

‘For lookye here, Master Don’ (as for some time he could not keep himself from calling him), ‘it takes me pretty near all my time to show you your work.’

But, by degrees, when he found out that Don had no ambition to be Colonel Oliphant’s pet show-keeper, to be brought forward and shown off whenever there was a shooting party, but infinitely preferred to keep out of the way whenever his duties permitted it, and had a curious repugnance to any intercourse with the gents, though that intercourse was apt to end with the transfer of coin from one party to the other,—a repugnance which West could not the least sympathise with, and could hardly believe to be real, till he saw on one occasion a hand, plainly not empty, extended in Don’s direction, and entirely ignored by that young man, who stood growing brick-dust red, with his hands behind him, staring at the trunk of a tree.

After this, West began to allow that there were good points in young Grant, and, as he was failing very fast himself, he condescended to let Don do more and more of his work.

Of course, where the worst rub came for Don, was not so much over the work, but in leisure times and

holidays, when he was expected to be sociable, and hail fellow well met with Dick, Tom, and Harry, and to take his pleasures after the manner of the class in which he had placed himself.

Don was not fastidious. He had not, as we have seen, mixed in society, or even had the opportunity of associating with boys of his own class at school; what friends he had had, not furred or feathered, were mostly from what his sisters called the lower orders, but even with these former friends the situation was altered when he had descended to their level, and there was no longer the feeling of distinction in being chums with the parson's son.

He was not sociable by nature, and I do not think he had much sense of humour, at least of the sort of humour found in the bar of the Green Man, and he had that fatal drawback to male sociability that he did not smoke, which, combined with a craving for fresh air, made the snug, little tap-rooms of the public-houses almost unendurable to him.

I think he would have found things easier if he had been open to the blandishments of Polly West, the keeper's daughter. She was several years older than he was, and a good-tempered, buxom girl, with a certain amount of showy good looks and lively manners. It seemed to her, and perhaps to some others, a very natural thing that young Grant (there now! she always

should think of him as Master Don) should want a wife to look after him, and one, too, that was used to the keeper's life, and knew how to get things comfortable when he was watching out at night, and in to meals at all hours of the day.

She pervaded Don's cottage for the first few weeks, and looked after his comforts in a half-motherly way that would have been pleasant to him, especially just then, when he was feeling lonely and strange without his family, if he had not guessed the ultimate intention.

And he liked Polly West, and had known her all his life, and he did not like to seem ungrateful, or snub her sufficiently sharply to penetrate the rhinoceros hide of good-tempered self-conceit that encased her. But he managed to do it somehow, and had a very bad time of it in her black books, with many indescribable small annoyances and humiliations, till she got engaged to a small grocer in Kingham, when she made it up with Don, and went over, then and there, and routed out a whole heap of stockings that wanted mending, and carried them off to darn for him, much to Miss Whateley's indignation, who considered this her special department.

Three years after Don went there West had a paralytic stroke, and though he partially recovered, and stayed on at the old cottage, and kept up a certain appearance of control, and was consulted and considered, Don was practically head-keeper, so that West's

death in the following year made little difference to Don's work, though it did to his stipend.

In spite of all that Mrs Grant said to the contrary—and his own mother ought to have known best—Miss Whateley could not see any disgrace in Don's position, or any reason why they should not continue good friends, and why Don should not come in, as of old, and sit on the three-legged stool by the fire, and why she and Sybil should not climb the steep path through the woods to the keeper's cottage, and keep an eye on patches and darns as far as Polly West would allow of such.

These occasional visits did a great deal to prevent Don from relapsing into barbaric comfort and ease. It was for their sakes that he mended and nailed and painted and cleared away heaps of precious oddments, and fastened up pictures, and kept his dogs and ferrets and other intimate acquaintances within certain limits, and abstained from nailing up stoats and pole-cats, and such like vermin, on his shutter, as had been the habit of past keepers from time immemorial. For their sakes he cultivated the little bit of garden in front with flowers that would almost compare with Miss Whateley's own, and would train the white rose over the thatched verandah, and round the bedroom window.

It would be hard to say how far the unconscious

influence of Miss Whateley and little Sybil affected Don's daily life, keeping him up to small refinements of dress and manner and habit and word, that might easily have been dropped in his rough surroundings, or how much was due to his coming of gentle blood, but, I think, his efforts at mental improvement may all be set down to Miss Whateley and Sybil. His wrestlings with overpowering sleepiness at night, over a book, were simply heroic, as was also his resistance to the siren voices of the midnight woods, that have a wonderful fascination to the ear that has once listened to their whispers.

But he felt, as he put it, such a miserable duffer when Sybil began to talk of what she had been reading, and she looked so disappointed when he could not understand; and he never could forgive himself for that occasion when she was reading some verses, with a voice thrilling with enthusiastic admiration, and, pausing for a moment to allow of an exclamation of delight from him, heard only a long breath, nearly approaching to a snore, from poor Don, with his head resting against the mantelpiece.

It was in vain that Sybil comforted him, and reckoned up all the long nights' watching and hard work, and pleaded with Don, against himself, that it was more than excusable. He could not get over it at all, and punished himself by extra half-hours of

laborious reading at night, with elbows on the table, and fingers propping open heavy eyes, that would close directly they were left to themselves, and trying to force his mind to take in the meaning of the wavering and indistinct lines of print, and keep off dreamy fancies that would keep interfering and jostling away the real sense.

He found poetry the hardest sort of reading, but, as it was Sybil's particular fancy, he would not be baffled, and, though he could not the least appreciate it, he would learn pages by heart, learning it almost as anyone might a foreign tongue. And then, virtue being often its own reward, the meaning and the beauty and the truth would come to him all of a sudden, and he would be quite startled to find how some poet, whose 'gibberish' he had learnt sorely against the grain, had described some scene, some sunset sky, some woodland solitude, just exactly as if he had been looking with Don's eyes at it, and a great deal better than if he had Don's tongue.

'Well, to be sure! that's just exactly how it is!' he would say, with almost an awe-stricken tone in his voice, as if there were some sort of magic in it, as I suppose there was.

I expect that, in many ways, Don, matter-of-fact though he was, was better able to appreciate poetry than many of us, for he had grown very close to nature,

and there can hardly be a better preparation for poetry than that.

It was Sybil's and Miss Whateley's influence, too, and perhaps the memory of the old father, that brought Don to church on Sunday. It was rather an ordeal at first, as every eye in the congregation was fixed curiously, or, worse still, pityingly, on him, as he took his place in the free seats, with a furiously-red face, and eyes fixed on a particular spot on the pavement.

He could hardly resist charging into the belfry to interfere with the bell-ringing, which was decidedly demoralised that first Sunday without him, but he steeled himself against the temptation, as also that of cuffing two little boys who were misbehaving in the seat in front of him, being no longer in the semi-official position of parson's son, with a right, if not a duty, to maintain order.

He surlily declined any of the hymn-books which were handed to him, or poked into his back, or tapped on his shoulder, as soon as it became apparent to the congregation that he was without one, and he pretended, in self-defence, to find the hymn at the end of his prayer-book, where the table of affinity comes, and he frowned in response to a well-meant whisper from an old almshouse man, when the new vicar gave out his text, 'Ah, it baint what us have been a-used to, be it, now?' though he accepted a little bit of sticky pepper-

mint from the small child who sat next him, and who was at that age when little boys have no knees, but sit in church with their short legs straight out, and two very small, hob-nailed boots on a level with the seat.

Don managed for some time to evade Mr Cullen, the new vicar, who was much interested in what he heard of his predecessor's son and anxious to befriend him, and to show that he did not think any the less of him for his present position. He said a little too much about not thinking the less of him; it is better to let those feelings go without saying; there is a spice of self-glorification in repeating them, as if you were more liberal-minded and superior to class distinctions than your neighbours.

When, at last, the two met face to face one evening in the churchyard, Don detected the condescension under Mr Cullen's cordial words, and resented it, all the more so, perhaps, because Mr Cullen was quite a head shorter than himself, and had champagne-bottle shoulders, which do not inspire respect *per se*.

So Don armed himself with a surly boorishness, scowling down on the little man in a most repulsive manner, so that Mr Cullen's kindly condescension died within him, and the interview came to an abrupt conclusion, and the vicar entered his wife's drawing-room a little flushed and discomfited.

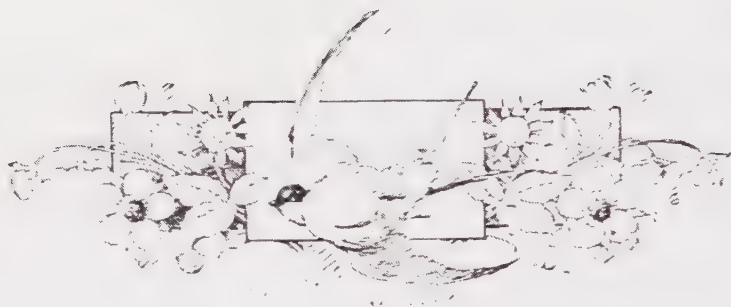
'My dear,' he said, 'it is quite shocking how that

young Grant has sunk. I could not possibly ask him in here, or introduce him to you. He has not the slightest idea of manners or ordinary politeness.'

'Dear, dear! how sad,' said Mrs Cullen. 'I wonder Miss Whateley has anything to do with him, but I suppose it is for his father's sake.'

And they shook their heads together gloomily over Don's degradation, as his mother had done in that very room often before.





CHAPTER XVII.

SYBIL UP TO DATE

Take this flower from me
(A white rose, fitting for a wedding gift)
And lay it on thy pillow. Pray to live
So fair and innocently; pray to die,
Leaf after leaf, so softly.

DEATH'S JEST BOOK.

NOW, having brought Don up to date, I must tell what those eight years had done for Sybil, besides turning her into such a lovely maiden. That chance meeting with Lady Betty had ripened into a close friendship, and during the two years Lady Betty spent at Billington, principally in a recumbent position, Sybil was her constant companion, sharing her lessons as well as her amusements, and getting almost as much at home in the big house, with its stately rooms and broad staircases, as she was in Miss Whateley's modest, little abode.

When Lady Betty and Mademoiselle Lange were

alone at Billington Hall, they only occupied a pleasant, warm suite of rooms in one of the wings, and Sybil came in and out by the garden door, and only occasionally explored the grandeur of the front hall, and the big drawing-room with the furniture all swathed in holland coverings, and the oak-panelled dining-room, across which, through the crack in the shutters, the December sun pointed a long, dusty finger of light at the rosetted shoes of a cavalier Billington over the carved-oak side-board.

Lady Betty, from her sofa, would direct these explorings of Sybil's, and she developed quite a lively interest in her own ancestors, whom she had always hitherto regarded as tiresome and dull now that Sybil was curious and anxious to know all about them. Mademoiselle Lange was no good at all in satisfying this desire for information, as she only knew history in a neatly-bound book covered with brown paper to avoid soiling the cover, and containing the reigns of kings condensed into chapters of equal length, with dates at intervals, and questions and answers at the end of each chapter. That was history, and if you went beyond that, you trespassed on the domain of fiction, which was paper-covered and loosely sewn, and unsuitable for little girls' reading, and should be kept quite at the bottom of adults' work-baskets, or have a handkerchief dropped over it if the reading were interrupted.

Mrs Light, the housekeeper, who took visitors round to see the house, did not think Sybil worthy of the effort of reeling off the names and dates and painters in her usual mechanical and somewhat asthmatical manner, so the girls made it out for themselves, as well as they could, and if they were a century wrong, here and there, it did not much signify.

But when the dowager arrived, just before Christmas, everything was changed. The state rooms were all thrown open, huge fires blazed all over the place, a regiment of servants arrived, wax candles twinkled in the chandeliers and massive, old candelabra, the family plate shone on the sideboard, and the family portraits, which had seemed to Sybil to be living their lives over again in the great deserted rooms, withdrew into their frames, and became mere history again, to make room for the tide of modern life that swept through the place.

But the Dowager Lady Billington, though she brought all the nineteenth-century, present-day life with her, might quite well have belonged to the past herself, might easily, Sybil thought, have stepped up into one of the heavy-gilt frames in the picture-gallery, and have crossed her delicate, yellow-ivory, blue-veined hands on her velvet lap, and turned her neck in the soft ruffles of old lace a little on one side to show the profile that was still delicate and fine, though the skin was yellow and wrinkled, and the dark eyes, that had once done heavy

damage on the hearts of men, had lost their lustre; the snow-white hair, elaborately arranged, might well have been taken for powder, and the whole would have been quite in keeping with the other stately dames whose portraits little Sybil had studied.

Miss Whateley kept Sybil at home the first day after Lady Billington's arrival, though the little pony cart came as usual, and the child was a little uneasy at not going, as Lady Betty had laid special injunctions upon her to be sure to come and see Granny.

Perhaps some of Mrs Grant's scathing remarks about toadying stuck in her memory, and made her feel as if she would rather not take it for granted that the child would be as welcome now that Lady Betty was no longer alone, and she kept telling herself all the morning that she did not the least expect any further notice from the Hall, and planning in her tender, old heart how she could make up to Sybil for what she feared would be a great disappointment.

I am afraid Sybil was a little bit fidgety and restless that morning, and could not settle to any of the old employments that used to satisfy her, and Miss Whateley got a little low, and thought that perhaps after all she should have done better to follow Mrs Grant's advice, and not allow Sybil to go there at all.

But by the afternoon the child was all right again, and quite absorbed in knitting a pair of muffatees for Don's

Christmas present, of a complicated pattern, that required the greatest concentration of attention to prevent fatal blunders.

So greatly was she engrossed that she did not even observe the large Billington carriage coming along the street, and was quite startled when it drew up at Miss Whateley's gate, which opened to admit a preternaturally tall footman, with a mighty fur tippet on. Five years is a very long time when it is more than half one's lifetime, and the episode of Mrs Harrington Jones's sudden appearance, and of that short, bitter little stay at Colcroft, had faded and lost its sharp edges by the action of time, but Lady Billington's carriage recalled it to her mind, and the child turned a little pale, and drew nearer to Miss Whateley, who, it need hardly be said, was in a terrible fluster, wishing that the construction of the house, and the stairs leading straight up from the front door, did not make it impossible for her to hurry up and make some improvements in her appearance.

Also, the present Maria had only been there a fortnight, and was at the roughest, a mere block of good-natured uncouthness, having put off all the manners of a nice, little, sixth-standard, national school-girl, with her lilac print pinafore, and not yet acquired the appropriate behaviour for the white, check-muslin apron and rather solid mobcap provided by Miss Whateley

for afternoon wear. There was no knowing what she might say or do, suddenly confronted by a tall London footman, with that fine carriage behind him, out of which some one, it might even be Lady Billington herself, though that was not likely, was apparently preparing to descend.

Even in her agitation, Miss Whateley was conscious of a feeling of thankfulness that Mrs Grant was not at Hayhurst to see the carriage there, or she would have been sure to think it was her, Miss Whateley's, fault. But the moment Lady Billington, for it was she herself, was in the room, all agitation and uncomfortableness ceased.

'It was very odd,' Miss Whateley reflected afterwards, 'that she should have been so different to Mrs Harrington Jones.' Miss Whateley somehow forgot all about her being the dowager countess, and felt qualms afterwards, that she had not behaved with befitting respect; but there was not the slightest sign of patronage in her manner, and she and Miss Whateley compared notes about rheumatism and cold feet at night, just as if the limbs of countesses were every bit the same as other people's.

And she was so confidential about Betty's back, and what the doctors had said about it; but, I think, the culminating point in Lady Billington's delightfulness was her undisguised admiration for Sybil when the

child had gone up to find some night-socks of peculiar construction which Miss Whateley recommended for cold feet.

‘She is perfectly lovely, Miss Whateley. Betty told me she was, but you can’t always take a child’s description of her friend quite literally. I remember seeing her mother once or twice, and thinking how sweetly pretty she was, but the child is ever so much prettier. Oh yes, I heard her parents had been unfortunate. Poor child, but they have given her a handsome legacy of good looks, and that is more than my Betty can ever hope for. Upon my word, Miss Whateley, if Billington were a few years older, I should hesitate to throw such a little beauty in his way, but he is more taken up with cricket and football at present than with young ladies. That will be an anxiety a few years hence. Sybil,’ Lady Billington went on, as the child came back with the night-socks, ‘Betty was in despair when the cart came back without you this morning, and nothing would satisfy her till I promised to come this afternoon to see what had become of you. I meant to come very soon, Miss Whateley, but I don’t think I should have come the very first day I was down here if it had not been for my imperious granddaughter. Ah, Miss Whateley, we old ladies get sadly tyrannised over by the young folk, don’t we? Now, nothing will satisfy Betty but Sybil coming every day and doing lessons

with her. She wanted me to propose that she should come altogether, and sleep at Billington, and she had planned it all out,—what room she was to sleep in, and all the rest of it,—but there I put my foot down' (a little distressed flush in Miss Whateley's face had not escaped Lady Billington's notice, and made her determine to resist this whim of Betty's). 'It's bad enough to take her away all day, but I am sure you would not like to spare her altogether to us.'

An indistinct murmur from Miss Whateley about 'Whatever is best for the child.'

'I'm sure it's best for the child to be as much as possible with such a kind, old friend.'

Now that sort of speech always made Miss Whateley's eyes moist, and her spectacles dim, so she could not clearly see if Sybil's face expressed anxiety to go.

'I daresay the child would like it. It's very kind of you.'

The remembrance of that sleepless night and bitter, anxious day, five years ago, weighed very heavily on Miss Whateley, and a feeling of what a selfish, old woman she was to think for a minute of her own loneliness, when it concerned the well-being of the child.

'Shall we leave it to Sybil to decide?' said Lady Billington, whose eyes were not dimmed, and who could read pretty plainly what was passing in the child's mind.

Miss Whateley gave a little sign of assent, not feeling as if her voice were quite under her control just at present.

‘Well, Sybil, will you come and live with Betty, and have the room next hers, or will you stop with Miss Whateley, and come over for the day as you have before?’

There was no hesitation. ‘Please, I’d rather stop with Auntie. I’m very fond of Betty, and I like being with her, and it’s very kind of her to want me to come, but I couldn’t leave Auntie. Please, I’d rather not.’

‘Of course not. I knew you wouldn’t, and I don’t think I should have liked to have you so much if you’d been willing to come. There, I mustn’t stop a moment longer; as it is, I have left my visitors to their own devices an unconscionable time. The pony cart will come for Sybil to-morrow, and she mustn’t disappoint Betty again, and you must come up and see me, Miss Whateley, some day, and have tea, and give me your advice about Betty, won’t you?’

The following two years were mainly spent by Sybil at Billington with Lady Betty, only on very rare occasions, however, failing to come home in the evening to Miss Whateley, and to sleep in the little bed in the corner of Miss Whateley’s room; and during this time she shared all Lady Betty’s studies, the French and

German governesses, the music and drawing-masters, and, towards the end of those two years, when the weakness discovered or apprehended in Lady Betty's spine was declared by the doctors to have passed off, there were dancing lessons, and scampering about the country on one of the two little, rough, Welsh ponies provided for the girls' use. For the greater part of the time Lady Betty and the governess were alone there, but occasionally Lady Billington came down for a week or two, and sometimes the young earl, a plain, sensible, freckled youth, singularly deficient in those graces and elegancies usually attributed to the aristocracy. Lady Billington could not endure more than a few weeks in the country; she only came from a strict sense of duty and real affection for her little granddaughter, and soon grew bored and rheumatic and fidgety. I think, too, that in her inmost heart, which was a kind one, though choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of the world, the neglected state of the property worried her.

'I'm really much too old,' she would say fretfully, 'to interest myself in drainage and poor people's pigsties, though it is quite the fashion now to take up such nasty subjects. It must all wait till Billington comes of age, and, really, he seems to be distinctly developing country-gentleman tastes, which is more than his father or his grandfather ever did. I shouldn't wonder if he settled down at Billington, and made a

capital landlord, and looked after the tenantry, and was interested in pigs, and sent fat bullocks to the cattle show, and was a J.P., and read the lessons in church, and all the rest of it. I don't know where he inherited the taste from, unless it was from his mother's family, but I daresay it's all the better for him and the estates, which certainly do want a little looking after, as some of the cottages are a disgrace, and the drainage, or the want of it, shocking.'

Lady Billington often went to see Miss Whateley during her visits to the Hall, though she gave up pressing the old lady to return her calls when she found how it fussed and flurried her, and how much preparation and arrangement beforehand such calls required. So the Billington carriage was often to be seen outside Miss Whateley's gate, and though, happily for her peace of mind, Mrs Grant was not there to see and comment, other neighbours were not slow to remark on Lady Billington's capriciousness in taking up that poor, old Miss Whateley, and making so much of her, quite an unpretending, homely old body, very good and all that, but nothing to make such a fuss over. But then, as they added, Lady Billington has always some prime favourite, just a whim that will soon go off. Mark my words, Miss Whateley will be dropped like an old glove in a month or two.

But, at any rate, during those two years during

which Lady Billington came at intervals to the Hall, the old glove had not been dropped; indeed, it seemed to fit all the closer as time went on, and Lady Billington used to drop in for a cup of tea and a gossip, just as friendly and unceremoniously, Miss Whateley used to say, as old Mrs Green from Hayhurst Farm might have done, 'only I really do think Mrs Green would be the most formal.' And Lady Billington used to find herself talking to Miss Whateley, just as a simple, old woman who was drawing near the great change, without any of the pomp and circumstance that had surrounded her life, and without all the little, cynical, worldly ways of speech and manners of thought, that had seemed her very own self till she sat with Miss Whateley in the firelight, and found herself in a simpler, truer, purer atmosphere.

'You dear, good soul,' Lady Billington said, when she went away after one of these talks, 'when my time comes, if it comes before yours, I should like to have you by me just to see me through.'

'Me! Lady Billington!' Miss Whateley was quite aghast at the idea. 'There's Mr Cullen, such a clever young man; and his sermons really beautiful, though I don't quite understand them.'

'Very likely, very likely, but I don't think it wants much cleverness to be a comfort just then, and I'd rather have you.'

Which made Miss Whateley feel a little uncomfortable, though Lady Billington was not the first who had wanted Miss Whateley when their feet felt the first chill of death's dark flood.

At the end of those two years, when the doctors declared Lady Betty's health quite re-established, she was sent to school at Berlin, and Billington Hall was once more left to solitude and holland covers and the care of a superannuated butler and his wife, and Sybil went back to her old life with Miss Whateley, gardening and pottering in and out of the Hayhurst cottages, washing up tea-things, and goffering frills.

It was greatly to Sybil's credit that she settled down again happily and contentedly. Many girls would have been permanently upset, and rendered discontented and restless, but Sybil had a certain breezy, sunny character about her which seemed to keep her free from the fogs and vapours that close round the brightest of us at times.

And then, when Miss Whateley was anxiously considering the future education of the child, and getting out the arithmetic and French grammar which had been allowed to rest comfortably on their shelf for the last two years, Lady Billington wrote to say that Mademoiselle Lange, who had been Betty's governess the first year she was at Billington, was going to settle in Kingham, and take a few young ladies to educate. Lady

Billington was very anxious to assist her, and, if Miss Whateley did not object to Sybil going to her, and would allow her, Lady Billington, to pay the fees, it would give her an opportunity of helping Mademoiselle Lange, which she did not otherwise see her way to doing. It was all put entirely on the ground of assisting Mademoiselle Lange, but Miss Whateley quite recognised the great kindness to her and Sybil, and, with many painful misgivings as to what Mrs Grant would say if she knew of the arrangement, gratefully accepted, and for the last six years Sybil had gone into Kingham daily, and Miss Whateley allowed her French verbs and avoirdupois weight to drop permanently into oblivion.

Miss Whateley used sometimes to wonder what she should have done if this delightful solution of the problem of Sybil's education had not been found, for it was by no means easy to make two ends meet, even in the matters of housekeeping and dress, and it would have required greater ingenuity than the old lady possessed to economise in any way with a view to education.

As Sybil grew up, it often lay heavy on Miss Whateley's heart that she could not dress her darling in all the lovely and elegant things she saw displayed in the drapers' shop windows at Kingham, which perhaps was quite as well, since Miss Whateley's taste was not

infallible, and the directions of the elegant shop girls at Crouch and Turner's not strictly to be relied on, though they laid down the law freely as to the fashion and the latest thing.

But Sybil retained that characteristic she had had when she first came to Hayhurst, that she looked well in anything, bless her! and she had the art only one in a thousand has, of putting on her things well, and, as she grew up, developed a talent for dressmaking and millinery that quite alarmed Miss Whateley by the stylish results produced. This gift of Sybil's was the cause of some uncomfortableness about a bonnet of Maria's, that Sybil had trimmed up so elegantly that Mrs Cullen felt obliged to mention it to Miss Whateley, as Maria was one of her Friendly girls, and attracted too much attention in that dainty, little arrangement.

Sybil and Lady Betty kept up a correspondence, constant at first, but naturally growing less frequent as time went on, and on that June morning when we find Sybil again at seventeen among the roses, nearly six months had elapsed without her hearing anything of her old friend.



CHAPTER XVIII.

A BIRTHDAY.

Once she lean'd on me,
Descending ; once or twice she lent her hand,
And blissful palpitations in the blood,
Stirring a sudden transport, rose and fell.

TENNYSON.



THAT June day on which we come back to Hayhurst was a red-letter day in Sybil's calendar, one which was distinguished every year from its sunny, long, June brethren, and formed the date from which Sybil reckoned forward and backward, ever since she came first to Hayhurst.

When she was little she used to wake on that day almost as soon as it was light, and that is saying a great deal on the eve of 'Barnaby bright, all day and no night,' and as soon as Miss Whateley stirred, which was pretty soon, you may be sure, with such watchful, round, bright eyes fixed on her, and such fidgety, little

endeavours to be as still as a mouse, Sybil would ask Auntie what day it was.

And Miss Whateley always went through the form of pretending to forget, and would say, 'Why, Tuesday,' or 'Wednesday,' as the case might be, 'to be sure.'

And Sybil would burst out in irrepressible delight, 'Something besides Tuesday.'

'Well, it's the eleventh of June, then.'

'Something besides that!'

'Yes, to be sure, it's the day the speckled hen is to hatch.'

'No, it's not. That's not till Friday.'

'Why, whatever can it be, then?'

And then Sybil could contain the important fact no longer. 'Why, it's Don's birthday, and you've quite forgot!'

And to-day was Don's birthday, and she and Miss Whateley were going up to have tea with him, and that was why she was picking roses so recklessly to wreath the birthday cake that Miss Whateley was busy over indoors, and which she had never failed to make every year since Don was a baby boy.

Don was making extensive preparations for the festival, and I think Mrs Cullen, with her firmly-rooted ideas of Don's rough boorishness, would have been surprised if she could have seen the arrangements

that degraded Don was making that June afternoon for his birthday guests.

The old woman who came every morning to 'do' for Don was quite put about by his fidgets that day. She never did see such a caddie. Folks didn't want to eat off the floor, and the windows was a deal cleaner than most folks a'ready.

After she was gone, grumbling till she was beyond hearing, and perhaps further, Don did pretty near all her work over again, sweeping and dusting and rubbing and washing and re-arranging. He had even invested in an antimacassar of a tinselly and meretricious appearance, which he vainly tried to arrange on the back of his old leather chair, to give a fashionable and elegant effect, but which would do nothing but look odd and out of place and incongruous, so that it was almost a relief when, on a sudden necessity for a duster, he snatched it up without thinking what he was doing, and used it for that purpose, and hopelessly crumpled and soiled it, out of all further use for ornamentation or decoration.

At any rate there was no want of flowers, and these did not look so incongruous, and he had only to go a few steps into the wood to get a sheaf of honeysuckle and wild rose and foxgloves and young oak tips and mountain-ash flowers. He lamented that there was not a single vase in the house, but

pudding basins and jam pots served the purpose quite as well.

He folded and stored away the cat-skin rug that was so handsome an object, and covered up defects on the horse-hair sofa; for the slaughter of cats, though a necessary part of a gamekeeper's duties, was a painful subject with Sybil and Miss Whateley, who could not admire the handsome tiger stripes and soft fur without a pang for the bereft owner of the lost pussy, and the empty place on the hearthrug, and the untouched saucer of milk.

He also moved a specially-privileged ferret out of the room, for Miss Whateley could not get over her horror of its cruel, mean face, and blinking, expressionless, pink eyes, and quick, subtle movements, though Sybil had learnt to admire them and coax and pet him. He even proceeded to chain up Bounce, the big, red setter, who was his devoted slave, loving him with that great love dogs give, and of which few men, it seems to me, are worthy. But Bounce looked so desperately hurt in his mind that he was unfastened, and put on his honour not to put his nose on the tablecloth, or sit on Miss Whateley's dress, or otherwise misconduct himself.

And then Don spread the tea, and perhaps it was a good thing there was still an hour before his guests would arrive, to allow of all the alterations and

improvements that were found necessary in the disposition of the very simple repast. He turned the table-cloth three times to get the best side up, and he washed the tea-cups so often that one of the handles came off by stress of cleanliness, and he altered the position of the dishes a dozen times at least, the honey here and the raspberry jam there, the water-cresses one side and the strawberries the other, leaving room in the middle for the cake that was sure to arrive with his guests, and filling up corners with eggs here and there. And then there was no room for the big, crusty, home-made loaf and newly-churned butter from the farm, and Don was racked with indecision as to whether slices of wafer bread and butter would not be more elegant, with doubts as to whether he was capable of cutting it as he remembered it used to be done at home on the rare occasions when visitors were offered afternoon tea.

He had been extravagant over the strawberries. It was early for them yet, but he had ordered them at a shop in Kingham at a price that he did not intend Miss Whateley to find out. He could afford to be a little extravagant now, he told himself, for, in those eight years that had passed since his father's death, he had paid off all the tradesmen's bills that had been owing, an action that brought him no thanks from his own family, who regarded it as quixotic and unnecessary,

and money that would have been better bestowed on his mother and sisters, instead of merely screwing out a paltry pound or two when they were impelled by their necessities to apply to him.

But Don felt more at ease now when he passed the grave in the churchyard, which he and Sybil kept so trim and tidy, and he could look kind, old friends in the face without the shame he used to feel, all the more because not one of them would have reminded him of the debt, or thought him responsible in any way.

Everything was ready now, except making the tea and boiling the eggs, which must be done after his guests arrived; and the fire in the little back kitchen was made up, and the kettle ready to put on, and the saucepan for the eggs handy, and Don washed his hands for the sixth time, and looked discontentedly at his collar in the little shaving glass against the wall, and whistled to Bounce and went down through the wood to meet his guests.

Such a lovely afternoon. Just the afternoon for the woods, for perhaps that generous June sun might have been a little too hot in the meadows, and the little breeze would have set the dust flying in the road.

The sun came through the trees in great, bright shafts on emerald moss, on smooth, silver-beech trunks, on ruddy, rugged pines and russet beech-masts, bringing out a myriad shades and tints of fresh, young green, and

throwing into exquisite relief the broad, quiet shadows, growing blue in the distance, where a vista among the trees opened ; while overhead the young leaves flickered against a sapphire sky, or the blue-grey, serious pines gently stirred. There is a wonderful buzzing of insects if you listen, and you would think, to look at them, they were all in the sunbeams, which seem as if they had palpable walls to keep the quivering, dancing creatures in out of the quiet shadow where the doves seem to have it all their own way with their soft, sleepy coo. But the doves have not all the shadow to themselves, for, if you listen, there are bird-voices coming from every side, trills of liquid silver from the wren, clear, strong, blackbird notes, gushes of pure thrush melody, shrill chaffinch songs, and half a hundred other bird notes, chirping and twittering and calling, inquiring, scolding, quarrelling and love-making, and now and again the solemn, bass caw of a rook sailing overhead, or even a nightingale lingering into June, with its exquisite love-note—all the fowls of the air singing their benedicite in their happy, innocent, woodland life.

The air is full, too, of sweet scents. The warm, resinous smell from the pine trees, the honeysuckle's fragrance, and many soft, dainty, under-scents of moss and young growth and flowering trees and shrubs, whose bloom we hardly realise or reckon among the bounteous beauties of spring and early summer.

They say that people get so used to beautiful surroundings that they leave off noticing them, but I do not think this is the case with everyone, especially with those who are blessed with a seeing eye and a hearing ear, and, what is rarer still, a smelling nose. Anyhow, the party at the keeper's cottage that afternoon had not grown hardened or blunted to its beauties, and, as they made their way up the path, Miss Whateley gratefully but apologetically accepting the help of Don's arm, they stopped many a time, partly to allow Miss Whateley to take breath, but also in sincere admiration for sights and sounds and scents.

It was a fact they none of them liked to realise, that each time Miss Whateley came to see Don, the walk was more of an effort to her, and more than once that afternoon Don was greatly tempted to pick up the old lady and carry her, only it would have hurt her dignity and distressed her so greatly.

So Don patiently restrained his long strides into step with Miss Whateley's short ones, and assured her that the pressure of her little, old hand on his arm was not in any way fatiguing to him, while Sybil made *détours* through the wood after flowers, or walked backwards before them, laughing and talking, with one hand on Bounce's silken, chestnut head, who looked up at the girl with soft, adoring, sentimental eyes, speaking as human eyes cannot, or, perhaps, dare not, do.

She was full of life and spirits, so gay and bright and happy, such a child too, clapping her hands to set the rabbits skurrying away to their holes with a flip up of their little, white tails, chasing a squirrel that frolicked along a branch as if on purpose to provoke pursuit, catching a great, sulphur butterfly with her hat, and then letting it go, with sudden compunction at even having inflicted a moment's captivity on a beautiful, free thing, running races with Bounce, and bringing him back with a great twist of bindweed round his soft neck. She made a lovely picture in her light dress, dappled with the sunlight through the branches, holding the dog by his flowery chain, and anyone but poor, ignorant Don would have compared her to a dryad, or a wood-nymph, or something classical or poetical, but he only watched her with eyes that had much the same expression as Bounce's.

'I have no present for you, Don,' she told him. 'Isn't it a shame? It's the first year I have given you nothing. I've helped Auntie with the shirts, and I've made a lovely cake, but that doesn't count. Don't you remember that first birthday after I came to Hayhurst? I made you a bead ring. I can just remember it. I thought it was so beautiful, and you promised to wear it always. Faithless Don! And the next year I worked you a book-mark on perforated card, with "Don" on it in pink silk, and Auntie cut a bit off her

best cap-string to mount it. And next year I hemmed you a pocket-handkerchief, such little, black stitches, with a drop of blood here and there where I pricked my finger.'

And so she ran on, recalling birthday after birthday, and Don seemed to have as accurate a remembrance of each, and sometimes even set her right, till they had each of the thirteen birthdays clear, with some distinguishing mark for each.

But by this time they had reached Don's cottage, and Miss Whateley was planted in the arm-chair by the window to rest, though she protested she was not a bit tired, while Don boiled the kettle and the eggs, and Sybil roamed about, admiring all the arrangements, and giving little touches here and there where Don's taste and execution had fallen short.

'Don, it's just perfect!'

'Don, where did you get such splendid honeysuckle?'

'Oh, Don! what strawberries! Make haste! make haste! or I shall devour them before you come.'

'Oh, Don! you never told me there were puppies. What darlings! May I bring them all in for Auntie to see? No, Spider, I'm not going to hurt them. Oh dear! how fat! their feet can hardly reach the ground!'

'Here's the robin's nest you told me of in the thatch. And oh! it's hatched. My dears! what big mouths.

You don't look as if you ever could grow into proper robin redbreasts.'

'Where are the ferrets? No, I won't bring them in. Auntie can't bear them, but I must see the Charade, he's such a wicked, clever, crafty, old thing. No, I won't let him bite me, and I don't believe he would. He knows me quite well, don't you, Charade, so don't twinkle your nose in that contemptuous way. Tea ready? Yes, I'm coming, if the dogs will let me.'

And there she was in the verandah, with two or three awkward, half-grown retrievers, with broad noses and big feet, shaking at the hem of her dress, and tumbling over one another round her feet.

A word from Don sent them flying, for only Bounce had been invited to join the tea-party, and he behaved very sedately, lying on the rug with his nose between his paws, not to be beguiled from absolute obedience by Sybil's offers of cake, only acknowledging her politeness by a wave of his feathery tail, but ready at a word from his master to start up into alert life.

After tea, at which neither Miss Whateley nor Sybil could eat quarter enough to satisfy Don, Miss Whateley declared she would wash up the tea-things, while Sybil went with Don to see some of the young pheasants, which was always part of the birthday programme, though the remembrance of October always marred the pleasure Sybil would otherwise have got in watching

the bright-eyed, quick-running, little, brown chickens, who were already developing wilder and more roving tendencies than their more domestic cousins in the poultry-yard, and causing great agitation in their comfortable foster-mothers, who naturally expected them to grow up into steady, homekeeping, barn-door fowls.

But a whistle from Don would bring them all fluttering and fussing round him, eager for the handfuls of grain that they knew would come from the capacious pockets of his velveteen coat.

Sybil could not help wondering if, on some of those great *battues* in which Colonel Oliphant delighted, when the guns went pop—pop—pop so quickly you could hardly count the number, and the beautiful cock-pheasants flew up in their gleaming plumage of oriental splendour, with the sun shining on their burnished necks and gorgeous wings, to fall, a second later, a tumbled mass of feathers, into the dead leaves, they recognised Don, with a sense of bitter betrayal, as their old, familiar friend, whom they trusted, or gave a thought to the pockets of the velveteen coat, which had never failed to contain something for them in the early June days.

But such painful thoughts, if they arose, were put away this evening; on such heavenly June evenings the perplexing problems of life do not haunt one as they do in November fogs or bitter, east-windy, March days; all

the world is young in June, and the present is too beautiful and full and gracious to allow thought for the future.

Had there ever been such an evening before? Don wondered, as they two roamed about the woods together, visiting the open spaces or small fields on the outskirts of the wood where settlements of coops were found, sometimes sitting side by side on a turned up coop, or on a stile, or a fallen tree, sometimes pushing through thick tangle of brambles and bushes, Don going first, to push and beat the way, and Sybil following close behind, holding on to his coat, lest the blackberry sprays and tough, nut branches should fly back against her. Sometimes they would climb a little, steep ascent, with stones cropping out of the grass, and get a look over the tree-tops across the country, over which the sun, as it neared the horizon, cast such grand, long shadows, while it lighted up cottage windows into such brilliance as might have laughed to scorn man's greatest triumphs of electric light, or picked out some otherwise uninteresting building, square and slate-roofed, or some insignificant group of trees, to glorify into a wonderful thing of beauty, with a special out-pour of warm, golden light.

I wonder, if Don had been alone, if he would have seen it all? or if Fry, the under-keeper, had been crushing stolidly through the underwood behind him? He

always found, with Fry, that if he said 'Look!' that young man gazed wildly in every direction except the one desired, whereas Sybil saw directly. Fry, too, never took the initiative in seeing things, whereas Sybil was often the first to notice, and would say 'Oh, Don!' and lay a small, detaining hand on his arm, or rest her cheek against his velveteen sleeve, while they peered through the bushes at some little peep of woodland life, some snug little *coterie* of rabbits, sitting on their haunches, with ears erect and twinkling noses, as evidently having a good gossip as any afternoon-tea party; or some nest full of young birds, over which the anxious, bright-eyed mother hovered, as if there never had been anything half as beautiful as those limp, flabby, bare-necked, little objects with huge, yellow mouths always agape for food; and this maternal feeling seemed to be shared equally by a pair of hedge-sparrows, who were toiling vainly to satisfy the cravings of a great, hungry, importunate young cuckoo, just out of the nest, and fluttering short, clumsy wings as it called imperatively for more.

There seemed a glamour of enchantment over everything that evening, and one proof of the magic that prevailed was that the time flew past so quickly. It hardly seemed more than a few minutes since they finished tea, and set off along the path, leaving Miss Whateley, tea-cloth in hand, turning up her sleeves

preparatory to washing-up; and there was the sun, nearing the horizon, and beginning to raise the little, delicate flush in the east that often precedes the rich sunset glories of the western sky.

‘Auntie will be wondering where we are,’ Sybil said. ‘She will think we are lost. Come, Don.’

She had been talking so gaily up till that moment, but now she fell into silence, so that Don, going as usual in front to clear the branches away, looked round anxiously more than once, fearing she was tired.

‘Are you tired, Sybby?’

‘No, Don, only sorry.’

‘Sorry! For what?’

‘That to-day is over. It has been so pleasant. Oh! Don, don’t you wish it was your birthday every day, and that Auntie and I were always up here with you?’

An inarticulate, gruff ejaculation from Don expressed assent. I do not think a whole poem could have worthily expressed his feelings, so perhaps a grunt did quite as well as any other answer.

He was taking her back to the cottage by a short cut, down a steep part of the wood, where the tangle of undergrowth was very thick, and where the trees were so close overhead that it was dusk already there, though the sun had not set outside in the open. He beat his way sturdily through the bushes, while she, coming behind, held on to his coat, or sometimes, when

the ground sloped much, put her hands on his broad shoulders, and there was something in the touch of her hands that made that ridiculous Don's heart throb and beat and swell and thump in a manner wholly unaccountable, and his breath come thick and strong, in great pants, as if he were choking.

Once, when, by the steepness of the way, he was so far below her that her hands were on his shoulders, and he could feel her warm breath on his neck, he stopped short, as if the way before him were impassable.

'Don,' she said, with a laugh, 'I declare it is you who are tired. You are quite out of breath. Wait a bit. There is no hurry. Auntie will have a nap till we come. Are you better?' and she tried to peer round into his face, her cheek so near to his in the soft twilight of the wood.

'Sybby,' he said, and his voice sounded very strange and deep, and no wonder, seeing the tricks that usually placid heart of his was playing him, battering at that wide chest as if it intended to come thumping out. 'Sybby,' he said, 'it's my birthday, and you've not given me a present.'

'No, Don. I'm so sorry. I thought of all sorts of things, but something came in the way of all of them. Is there anything you'd like, for I could get it now, though it's not nice to have one's presents after the birthday is over. Is there anything?'

‘Yes.’

‘What?’

‘A kiss.’ Did he say it? or did his heart say it for him? or did she guess it without a word, as she had so many of his thoughts that evening in the wood? And why should she have drawn back so suddenly, and taken her hands from his shoulders, and steadied herself with a bramble close by, which pricked her poor, little hands sadly, seeing that not so very long ago she had kissed Don as a matter of course, and thought no more of it than of kissing Miss Whateley?

Don stood rigid for a minute, and then went slowly on. His heart had left off thumping now, and felt like a stone in his breast, and Sybil tried her best to get on in a dignified way without him, and in a minute gave a slip right down against that broad back in front of her, and had, for mere self-preservation, to cling on to Don’s sturdy neck. And then he turned his head to see if she were hurt, and turning found his face was quite close to hers, and then——she gave him his birthday present.

They came out a minute after into an open space facing the west, which was glowing crimson and gold with the sunset, so that was why, I suppose, Don’s face was crimson too, and Sybil’s flushed up to her pretty ears.

‘Don drove Miss Whateley and Sybil home in the little keeper’s cart. The old lady was so tired when

they reached home that Don, helping her out of the cart, carried her right away in, and deposited her on the sofa, fluttered and a little hurt in her dignity.

‘I don’t think Don need have done it,’ she said, when he had gone ; ‘it was most unnecessary.’

And so it was (though Miss Whateley was not aware of the fact) that he should have done the same by Sybil, and quite inexcusable that he should have presumed on that sedately-given birthday present to hold her in his strong arms and carry her up the garden path, just as he used to do when she was a child, with all these myriad soft stars up above winking at such a piece of audacity.

‘Have you been happy to-day, Sybby?’ Miss Whateley asked.

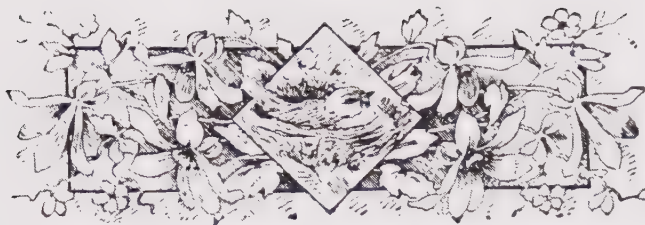
‘Yes.’

‘I am sorry, child, you had no present for Don. You would have liked to give him something.’

‘Yes.’

The sunset was long since over, and Miss Whateley’s little paraffin lamp gave no strong, ruddy light to account for the flush in Sybil’s face, stealing on to neck and very finger-tips.

No present for Don? Yes, she had given him something, something more than that shy, little kiss, and yet it seemed as if he had had her heart as long as she could remember.



CHAPTER XIX.

A LETTER.

The desire of the moth for the star,
Of the night for the morrow,
The devotion to something afar
From the sphere of our sorrow.

SHELLEY.



LETTER for you, Sybby.'

It was the morning after Don's birthday. Sybil was in a strange, dreamy state that morning, so unlike her usual brisk alertness that Miss Whateley looked at her anxiously more than once, thinking she must be ill, though, in the early morning, when Miss Whateley, as is very usual at fourscore, woke in the first grey light of dawn, and raised herself on her elbow, as her custom was, to look at her darling, she thought she had never seen her look so well. There was a smile curving her lips and dimpling her cheeks, which struck even Miss Whateley as something new, though she would have

protested that she knew Sybil's sweetness thoroughly by heart; but then she did not know the dream that caused the smile.

One little hand was lying against her cheek on the pillow, amid a tangle of curly hair, and, as the light grew stronger, Miss Whateley noticed that it was badly scratched on the pink palm, and that on one finger was a little bead ring such as children thread.

And, now she came to think of it, she remembered there had been some joke at tea about a bead ring that Sybil had given Don years ago, when she was a baby thing. Sybil declared he had lost it, and would not believe that he had it still, until he produced it, rather shamefacedly, out of a pocket-book in some inner pocket, and they had laughed to see how he could not get it over even the top joint of his little finger, and how Sybil fitted it on her own finger, and declared she would keep it and make another for Don, though he protested that he would rather keep that.

'I suppose she forgot to take it off when she went to bed last night,' Miss Whateley thought. 'Poor child! she was so tired.'

But she did not know that, when Don had bidden her good-night the evening before, and she had offered him her hand sedately, with as much dignity as was possible after being carried up the path, he had kissed that little, scratched hand with the bead ring on its finger, kissed

it again and again, so that it was warm and thrilling still when she went to bed, and she looked at it with an odd sort of wonder, as if it could not be the same little, useful hand that had gardened and washed and ironed and dusted. And then she put it softly to her heart, that was beating so quickly with this strange, new happiness, and to her cheek, which blushed at its touch as if those burning kisses could be transferred.

She could not make up her mind to take off the little bead ring that he had carried all these years so near his heart, and that he had kissed on her hand in the starlight.

She was so slow over her dressing that morning that Miss Whateley had to call to her twice, and, going up to see what kept her, found her in a sort of dream, with her long, bright hair all about her shoulders, and her eyes fixed on the sweet, little, shy face reflected in the cracked, old looking-glass.

‘What a vain, little puss!’ Miss Whateley said.

But it was more interest than vanity, and a desire to see herself as others, or, rather, one other, saw her, ‘a giftie,’ which, in early days of first love, would not be the painful, humiliating self-revelation that Burns intended when he wished

‘O wad some pow’r the giftie gie us,
To see oursels as others see us!’

The tea was made, and the postman had come to the door before she came down, and even that wonderful

event, 'A letter for you, Sybby,' which Miss Whateley proclaimed from the foot of the stairs, did not bring her hurrying down as it would on any other morning, perhaps buttoning her dress or fastening her collar as she came; and Miss Whateley's little trick to punish her for being late, by hiding the letter under her plate, fell quite flat, for Sybil had forgotten all about it when she came down. She even helped herself to bread and butter, and poured out some milk for Shaver, the cat of the period, before Miss Whateley's mysterious expression of countenance and inquiries if the plate she was using had been properly washed, and if there were not a stain on the cloth underneath, attracted her attention, and made her remember the letter.

'It is from Betty,' she said, as she looked at the square, clear writing of the direction, and she said it almost languidly, as if a letter from Betty had not been in times past a great event both to her and Miss Whateley, a thing to be read again and again, and discussed and talked over, and even, after some considerable time had elapsed, brought out again and re-read, and fresh meanings discovered.

'Well!' said Miss Whateley, 'you don't seem in a great hurry to know what Betty says.'

For indeed Sybil was looking at the address for a whole minute instead of tearing the envelope open in her eagerness to get at its contents, and she quite

started when Miss Whateley spoke, for she was thinking that she had never had a letter from Don, and imagining what such an one would be like.

But when the letter was opened, all languor and want of interest vanished before the exciting news it contained. Betty was coming back to Billington, and at no distant or uncertain date, but that very day, that very 12th of June, and Sybil must go up to the park that afternoon to receive her.

‘I shall be all by myself, as Billington has not come back from his travels, and Grauny cannot tear herself away from London in the very height of the season—fancy that at eighty-four! I have told them to get ready our old rooms in the west wing, and written to dear old Mademoiselle Lange to come and see after us, so we shall be just the old trio, and I mean to let down my hair again in a pigtail and wear pinafores and eat lots of bread and jam, and expect you to do the same.’

‘Well, Sybby?’ Miss Whateley said, inquiringly, for, after the first surprise and excitement had subsided, the girl let the letter drop on the table-cloth, and sat thoughtfully crumbling the bread on her plate. ‘Well, Sybby? Isn’t it delightful, child?’

‘Yes,’ she answered; ‘only I wish——.’ What did she wish? She hardly knew herself, but I think it really was that this new delight had not come treading so closely on the heels of the other. Sometimes, but I

think it is only in very early youth, and rarely even then, life is too full of happiness. You get your glut of it. You cannot enjoy it properly all at once; it comes showering down on you so bountifully, you would like to spread it out more, even though you don't realise then how soon it will pass altogether, leaving only the sad memory of the sweetness to make more unpalatable the bitter herbs of daily life.

She wanted time to think about Don, and the new, wonderful feeling that seemed to have sprung suddenly into existence when her lips touched his cheek yesterday. She wished now that she had not done it. He must have thought her so bold and forward and unmaidenly—and yet—no, she could not honestly believe he thought so, he seemed to like it. She wanted days to think it all over, and to remember how it all happened and just what he said and how he looked.

She wondered so, too, how it would be when they met next, whether it would be just the same, whether he would come in and sit on the three-legged stool, without expecting her to stop if she were reading aloud, or to take any notice if she were busy. 'It's only Don,' she would say, and go on as if he were of no importance.

'I really think I must change my frock now in the evening,' she thought, 'this is so shabby.'

And she looked for the first time discontentedly at

her washed-out cambric, not knowing Don's firmly-rooted faith that whatever she wore was the most beautiful of costumes. He might, it was possible, perhaps more than possible, come that very evening, just to see if Miss Whateley were overtired. She had decided, while she was dressing that morning, that she would put on her Sunday frock in the evening, for there was a little tear in the one she had on,—the work, perhaps, of those briars that had left their mark on her hand, and she could not mend it conveniently while she had it on. And, besides, it is very unlucky to mend your clothes while you have them on; you are sure to come to want if you do it, Maria said, and she would rather go about all day with a stirrup of braid hanging from the bottom of her dress, and threatening to trip her up at every turn, than run the risk of misfortune by reckless industry.

Sybil wanted to be quite alone, to take some of these new, strange feelings out of her overflowing little heart, and look them well over and find out what they all meant and get used to them, without anyone, even Miss Whateley, looking on and wondering what she could be thinking of and interrupting, and she had planned to walk over to Billington to some of the cottages there, coaxing Miss Whateley not to come on account of the fatigue of the day before.

But now that letter of Betty's had put all that

luxurious day-dreaming out of the question, and imperilled that meeting with Don in the evening, to which she looked forward with a shy shrinking which she thought was fear, till the prospect of missing him fell cold on her heart.

‘But I will be back in good time,’ she kept telling herself. ‘Betty will not want me to stay long the first evening, and I will tell her I have something to do, and so I have, for I must mend that frock, it is quite a disgrace to go about in it. He will not be here very early, and I will not stop a moment after tea, and the walk across the fields does not take very long, and perhaps, after all, it will be easier if he is here before I come in. I feel as if I should run away and hide if I were sitting here and he came in at the gate just as he always does.’

You must not suppose that Sybil was not glad of Betty’s coming. A day or two before she would have been wild with delight, but her heart was not big enough to hold more than the one joy, that seemed to shut out everything else. But she kept telling herself and Miss Whateley that she was very glad, and when people find it necessary to reiterate a fact, it is always a little doubtful.

She was to be at Billington at half-past three punctually, and she must take some roses, for Betty always declared that Miss Whateley’s roses were nicer

than any at Billington, and so they were, Sybil agreed, and, for the matter of that, nicer than any roses anywhere, with a mental reservation anent a certain white rose trained over a thatched verandah. But all the morning Sybil was calculating how long it would take her to get back, and what valid excuse she could give for hurrying away from all the talk that those six years of separation would entail between her and her friend.

She got quite cross with Miss Whateley for pressing her to stay as long as she liked and not to hurry back, but to wait till it was cooler in the evening, as the day was certainly hot and sultry, and she fancied that Sybil was a little flushed. 'And the days are so long now, that it is quite light up to nine, and later. You must not hurry back on my account, my pet,' the kind, but mistaken, old lady kept repeating; 'I know you and Betty will have a lot to say to one another, and I shan't expect you till I see you, so tell Betty, with my love, that she may keep you as long as she likes, if you get back before it is dark. So good-bye, my sweet, and don't trouble your little head about me. I shall have a quiet evening all to myself.'



CHAPTER XX.

LADY BETTY.

Is this not she of whom,
When first she came, all flush'd you said to me,
Now had you got a friend of your own age?

TENNYSON.



BETTY BROOKFIELD at seventeen was wonderfully little altered from Betty Brookfield at eleven, at least outwardly, for it is to be hoped that all the machinery of education that had been brought to bear during the past six years, first-class schools, masters and mistresses, mademoiselles and fräuleins, classes and lectures, school books, grammars, histories, exercises, dictionaries, &c., had had more effect inwardly.

She was not even very much grown, and her square shoulders and somewhat thick-set build, though made the very best of by her tailor-made travelling dress, must have been a difficult subject for a French *modiste*

to deal with, with any hope of making it look either elegant or fashionable.

Her face was still freckled, but her mouth did not look so wide as it had done as a child, and no face could have been downright plain with those clear, straight-looking, grey eyes with their thick, black lashes and well-marked, level brows; and the piquant, little nose, though not strictly on the lines of classical beauty, gave an originality to the face that was certainly attractive.

She came jumping out of the carriage that had met her at the station with all the energy Sybil remembered towards the end of her stay at Billington, when the alarm about her spine was allayed, and she was rather proud of showing that she was quite as agile as other people; and, after the first greeting, she held Sybil by both arms, and looked her all over, till Sybil coloured rosy red, not being used to such close scrutiny, which seemed as if it might penetrate beneath the surface, and find out a poor, little, young secret, not a day old yet, that had not learnt to hide itself and be artful and deceptive.

But searching as those clear eyes seemed to guilty, little Sybil, they only really saw the lovely outside, and she bestowed a hearty kiss on each softly-blushing cheek, and declared, 'My dear, you are positively charming. Why didn't you tell me so when you wrote? Granny will mourn over my unfortunate

appearance all the more when she sees you. I do believe, if I had been more decent-looking, I should have made my *debut* this year, instead of putting it off till next, but, as I had no wish to dazzle the eyes of society with my freckles prematurely, I made the worst of myself whenever Granny looked critically at me, humped up my shoulders and turned in my toes and let my mouth drop open, till she absolutely shuddered at the sight of me, and caught at the idea of my coming down here till Billington came home. So here I am.'

The rooms in the west wing had been got ready for Lady Betty, and looked very pleasant with new chintz on the old-fashioned furniture and on the cushions in the deep window-seats, and roses in the rare old china bowls and jars which Sybil had filled before Betty's arrival. And, after Sybil's cheeks, it was the roses that Betty first took notice of, flying round and sniffing first at one great pink blossom, and then at another, going into raptures over the *Devoniensis*, and almost hugging the yellow briar, thorns and all.

She remembered, and pretty accurately, too, where they all came from in Miss Whateley's garden, and declared her intention of at once inaugurating a rose garden at Billington, and making Miss Whateley commander-in-chief.

'I daresay Collins understands orchids and hothouse plants, but he is much too grand to condescend to roses,

the Latin names are not half long enough. Come, Sybil, when we have had tea we will go down and choose the place for it. Mademoiselle can't come till the evening, and, to tell you the truth, I'm rather glad of it, as it gives us a little time to ourselves.'

'But——' Sybil began.

But Betty would not hear of any buts. 'Now, you can't pretend that Miss Whateley wants you. She is much too good an old lady to grudge you to me when we have not met for six years, and I've got all sorts of ideas in my head that I know will rejoice Miss Whateley's heart, things I mean to have done for the tenants, and improvements that I shall get Billington to carry out. I've been thinking a lot about it lately, and before Billington went away we used to talk about it, for he's much of the same mind as I am, and wants to be of a little use in the world, instead of just amusing himself and idling away his life. Granny can't a bit understand such feelings, and she and Billington don't hit it off at all, and she'd have a lot more sympathy with him if he kept a racing stud, and wasted hundreds on the turf, as some of our people have. But that's not Billington's line, and I'm very glad it's not, though Granny does call him a prig, and wonders where he got such pokey ideas from.'

If only Sybil could have given an undivided mind to all Betty's talk, if only she could have left off

wondering how the time was going, and whether Betty would notice if she looked again at the little travelling clock on the writing table, if only she could have left off calculating the time it took that long, swinging stride to come down through the woods and across the fields and along the road and up the garden path—‘Where’s Sybil?’ he would say—and how she wished, oh! how she wished she had left a message for him to be sure and wait for her, as she should be home as soon as possible. But Miss Whateley had not even suggested that Don was likely to come, and why should he, when he had seen them so lately? And Sybil felt a foolish, little reluctance to appear to expect him, or even to mention his name.

And so her mind kept slipping away from attention to Betty’s flood of talk, which otherwise would have been full of interest, and there were great blanks, as far as Sybil was concerned, in Betty’s vivid descriptions of past adventures or plans for the future, and she thought Betty never would have finished her tea, or leave off cutting slices of cake, which, no doubt, was very nice, but the eating of it consumed so much valuable time.

And after tea Betty slipped her hand under Sybil’s arm, and strolled out into the garden—yes, strolled. Betty could walk fast enough when she was inclined, faster than Sybil herself on occasions, but now she

strolled, lingering over every step, stopping at the smallest excuse, or no excuse at all, stooping to smell a flower, stopping to pick off a withered leaf, turning to look back at the fine old house, throwing her head back to look at the blue sky overhead, and the rooks cawing in the big elms.

From Betty's point of view, such conduct was entirely excusable after six years' absence from her beautiful home, but to Sybil it was irritating to almost a maddening extent. Would Mademoiselle Lange never come? What excuse could she make to get away? It is so difficult to find a plausible excuse when your only reason is that you want to get away dreadfully, sickeningly. If she had not wanted to go so very much it would have been ever so much easier to explain that she could not stop, or, indeed, she might just as well have told the truth, that there was someone coming to her aunt's that evening she did not want to miss. But this would have led to questioning, and Sybil knew that under Betty's clear, sensible eyes she would turn crimson and look ridiculously guilty.

Betty was not wanting in penetration, and more than once she detected that Sybil's attention had wandered, and that she was fidgety and ill at ease, but the six years' separation made her uncertain if this might not merely be strangeness and shyness that might wear off, and she had not yet learnt her way about in Sybil's

mind, which was by no means a tortuous or intricate one to a casual observer, and yet was a little bit puzzling in this new confusion and preoccupation that had overtaken it.

‘What time did Mademoiselle Lange say she would come?’ Sybil asked suddenly, very irrelevantly to the subject on which Betty was holding forth, and, indeed, she had not a notion if Betty were descanting on the beauty of a sunset in the Alps or on a new system of drainage for the Billington cottages, so completely had the striking of the stable clock driven everything but the passage of time out of her head.

‘Why, Sybil!’ Betty exclaimed, ‘I believe you are longing to be off. Well,’ as a guilty wave of colour rushed up over the tell-tale face she was watching, ‘don’t say “no,” for you couldn’t tell a story if you tried. But go, and to-morrow you shall tell me why you are in such a desperate hurry.’

And she kissed the girl’s hot cheeks, and stood watching her as she went out of the garden and into the park, quickening her pace when she thought herself out of sight into nearly a run.

Betty nodded her shrewd, little head gravely two or three times. ‘I expect, little Miss, there is an admirer in the question, and no wonder, I’m sure! But I hope he’s not a very exacting individual, or I shan’t see much of Miss Sybil up at Billington.’

And meanwhile, Sybil was hurrying along the field path to Hayhurst; at least sometimes she hurried, and sometimes she loitered, with that perversity that, now that she was free to go, made her half disposed to turn back, so that Don should not think she was rushing home breathless on his account. And, after all, she did not know that he would come, and it had never occurred to Auntie's mind that he would. And then she would hurry again with the thought that he would be disappointed, and linger again lest he should think her bold and forward to be so anxious to meet him again, and then she would vex herself with the thought that she had been unkind to leave Betty after that six years' separation, and then she would vex herself still more with the fear that she should miss Don.

At last she came into Hayhurst, and drilled her steps into their ordinary speed, neither hastening nor loitering.

They were not in the garden as she had expected, and her heart beat a little thick as she opened the gate, and she stopped to pick an imaginary weed from the gravel path, to allow of anyone seeing her from the parlour window and coming to meet her.

'Why, Sybil, child,' Miss Whateley cried, as the girl came a little bit wearily into the room where the old lady was doing some cutting out, and the table was

strewn with pieces of calico and pins, 'I did not think you would have been back for another hour. I told Don——'

'Has he been here?'

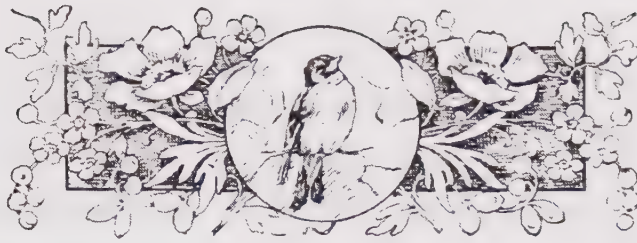
'Yes, he came in for five minutes, just to see if I was tired after yesterday. He couldn't stay. I told him where you had gone, and how nice it was for you Lady Betty having come back. Now, tell me all about her, my dear, and how she looks, and what she said.'

'In a minute, Auntie. I'll just take off my hat.'

'What a child she is still!' Miss Whateley thought, when she went up to see what had become of Sybil a few minutes later, and found her on her hands and knees in the bedroom, with tears running down her cheeks, searching for a few beads that had rolled away into the chinks and cracks of the old, worm-eaten boards.

It was the bead ring she had made for Don thirteen years before. The cotton had broken, and the beads were scattered, and Sybil was crying over it as if her heart would break.

'She is overtired,' Miss Whateley told herself, when she woke in the night and heard the child crying again, 'or she never would fret over such a trifle.'



CHAPTER XXI.

A REFORMER.

Never came reformation in a flood
With such a heady course, scou'ring faults.

SHAKSPEARE.



WONDER, if Don and Sybil had met that day after his birthday, when the first novelty of the wonderful new feeling in her heart was still too overwhelming for any disguise, whether the course of true love would have run more smoothly ?

She had not had time then to cover up this sweet, bold, innocent love of hers with any little, modest, coy pretences or disguises ; she would have looked straight into Don's eyes, to meet the love shining there, freely and frankly.

But the delay, prolonged by one circumstance after another, took away the first simplicity of the affair, and taught the girl to hide that tumultuous little heart of

hers, and to some extent to control the blushes and the agitation of her tell-tale, little face when Don's name was mentioned, or when a sudden step outside, or the impetuous swing of the garden gate, led her to expect his appearance.

She even learnt, in the next day or two, to draw the veil round her feelings even to herself, and to pretend that she did not care very much, and that she was not listening and hoping and wondering, and that her mind was full of Betty and all her plans for the future, and that the half-dozen beads, painfully collected from cracks and crannies of the bedroom floor, and carefully preserved in a little box, were only relics of her baby days and interesting on that account merely.

After that first collapse into childish tears over spilling a few beads, and subsequent quiet, little sniffings in the night, overheard by Miss Whateley, Sybil's spirits recovered with a rebound, and she was as gay as ever, or even more so, and even the anxious, old ear, so keen to notice anything amiss with the child, failed to detect a certain over-strained, unnatural tone in her liveliness, and only set it down to her natural pleasure in Lady Betty's return.

Betty, too, found her so bright and interested and pleased to come to Billington, that she forgot to question her about her hurried departure and preoccupation

of the day before, and you may be sure that Sybil was very careful not to remind her of it.

Lady Betty was one of those enthusiastic natures that get possessed by one prevailing idea to the exclusion of every other, and are so entirely taken up by it that they are apt to lose sight of anyone else having interests or enthusiasm of any sort, and are so intensely interested, heart and soul, themselves that they infect other people, and make them feel that, for the time being, nothing in the world is so engrossing as the subject under discussion.

Her enthusiasms were not always, perhaps, very deeply seated. They could not always bear the strain of persistent opposition, still less of tiresome drudgery and patient working out of small details, but they were very genuine while they lasted, and, now and then, they infected other people to more continuous and lasting purpose, which led to great results long after Lady Betty had forgotten all about the matter. And, after all, it is something to have set the snowball rolling, even if you go in directly after and warm your hands and forget all about it, and there is a lot of solid work done in the world that never would have begun, unless some small, bright enthusiasm had got up a brisk, little gale of wind to fill the sails at starting.

At present Lady Betty's one idea was philanthropy, and the object to be experimented on was the Billing-

ton property, which, as we have seen in former chapters, gave plenty of scope for it.

When Sybil went over to Billington next morning, which she did directly after breakfast, to show her penitence for any shortcomings of the evening before, she found Betty up to her eyes in plans and estimates for model cottages, matters of much too engrossing interest and supreme importance to allow of Betty's even remembering her suspicions of the evening before, of an admirer of Sybil's lurking in the background, and she insisted on Sybil's sitting down directly to give an opinion on the relative advantages of isolated or semi-detached pigsties.

'It is no use talking to Mademoiselle about it. She is revelling in a lot of French novels I brought home for her. She prefers moral pigsties. *Chacun a son gout*. Look here, Sybby. I've sent for the map of the estate, and I want you to expound it to me, and tell me what all the cottages are like, and this afternoon, if it's not too hot, we'll make a tour of inspection. I have been exploring the stables, which are a howling wilderness at present, with only two old mummies of carriage horses who tottered down to the station to meet me yesterday, and looked as if they were only kept upright by the pole and a tight rein. And then there is an enormously fat, barrel-bodied pony, which, if he can be forced in between the shafts of the governess

cart, will do to take us out this afternoon, and we will take it by turns to beat it, as I am sure nothing but constant use of the whip will keep it awake. I have told Hawkins to look about for two ponies for us. Don't you remember what fun we used to have on Tom and Jerry, tumbling on and off a dozen times in an afternoon ?'

'I expect I should tumble off oftener now,' Sybil said, 'for I have not been on a pony since.'

'Oh, you'll soon pick it up again. It's a sort of thing you don't forget, just like skating. You can have one of my riding skirts. My jacket would be miles too big for you. But Hawkins is a leisurely sort of man, and I don't expect we shall get our ponies for a few days, and we must content ourselves with our fat friend and the cart. When Billington comes home he will have to see about the stables, though he doesn't know a horse from a cow, and would much rather walk than ride any day. Granny is always girding at him about his want of interest in horses, which she seems to think part of the whole duty of man, but I think she ought to be thankful that Bill does not inherit the family tendency, even though I must confess he is a trifle too much devoid of it. Now, then, to business.'

And the two girls devoted themselves to the study of a somewhat greasy map of the Billington estate, very much cracked at the folds, and showing plain evidence

of routes traced out by not overclean forefingers, and in more than one place adorned with certain circular marks unconnected with fences or roadways.

‘Old Croxton demurred a good deal about lending me the map,’ Betty said, pointing to these manifestations. ‘He said it was not very accurate, and that he didn’t think I should be able to make it out. I suspect the same might be said of his accounts, but that will be for Billington to find out when he comes. Now, Sybil, are there no cottages there, where the crack comes, just at the edge of that mark of old Croxton’s glass. I declare, Sybil, I shall expect to come upon large circles here and there in different parts of the property, Druidic remains, I suppose, or enormous fairy rings. They are certainly very frequent on the map.’

‘Cottages? Oh yes, there are two, such pretty ones, thatched and all lopsided and tumble down, with funny, little, crooked windows, and all smothered in vine and ivy. I saw an artist sketching them last autumn, when the Virginia creeper was all in red streaks over the thatch, and he told Auntie he had never seen anything so picturesque.’

‘Highly unsanitary, I expect,’ Betty said, holding up an elevation of severely sensible appearance.

‘Well,’ Sybil was bound to confess, ‘I don’t think they are very healthy. There’s a ditch close by them, and it does smell dreadfully sometimes.’

‘Pigsties?’

‘Yes, close to the cottage doors.’

And Sybil was obliged to admit that it was on these pigsty roofs that the Virginia creeper made so brave a show in the autumn.

‘Who lives there?’

It was certainly not much in favour of those picturesque, old cottages the history Sybil gave of those who had lived and died in them, though she tried to make the best of it, of fever and rheumatism, rheumatism and fever; and Lady Betty made a significant mark against it in her list of cottages on the estate.

Sybil wondered how old Widow Dunford, who had lost her husband and two boys in that visitation of typhoid, and who was herself crippled with rheumatism, would like to be turned out of the old cottage where she had come as a young wife, and where she had seen most of the joys and sorrows of her life (and sorrows endear a place almost more than joys), and to be transferred to that hideously healthy abode, the picture of which Lady Betty was contemplating with so much satisfaction. Why, the very grumbling was part of her life. Sybil could not help wondering what she would talk about when the damp no longer oozed up between the bricks on the hearth, and soaked through the wall by the dresser. I am not sure that we should, any of

us, be much the happier if suddenly all our old-established causes for grumbling were removed. If, for example, the English climate were changed into the settled, balmy weather of the sunny south, we should feel a little bit like the old lady whose petticoats were cut short during her sleep, and who, on waking, doubted her identity. 'Lawk! it's never I.'

Our grievances grow so entirely part of ourselves, and it used to puzzle Sybil to fancy what some of the old folk would be like in heaven, without rheumatism or bad legs, or drinking husbands, or the price of bread, or anything to grumble about, and without any need for the great, pathetic patience which underlies the grumbling in the comfortless troubles of the poor.

It rather took Sybil's breath away, the bold sweep Lady Betty proposed making of picturesque cottages and grievances, rheumatism and drunkenness, and there was a certain sort of relief when old Croxton, the bailiff, came in, summoned imperatively by Lady Betty from his haymaking, to hear him call her 'little missy,' and treat the whole matter as rather a good joke, and urge that unanswerable argument against reform which had been lurking in Sybil's heart all the morning, even when she was most carried away by Lady Betty's enthusiasm, 'Things always have been so, and folks has got on well enough.'

'He's a stupid, pig-headed, old man,' Lady Betty

said decidedly, when he had taken his burly figure and beaming red face out of the room, leaving a slight odour of farm-yard behind him; 'but he'll find he'll have to move on with the times, or move off the estate, when Billington comes home. I expect he hasn't advanced an inch since he first came to the place, and has no more idea of all the improvements in farming than one of his pigs, and still less of all the movement that is going on for the elevation of the labouring classes. And, do you know, Sybil,' Lady Betty said, knitting her eyebrows sternly, and emphasising each word with a shake of her pen at Sybil, 'I think that man drinks. He has every appearance of it. His face is red——'

'Sunburn,' suggested Sybil, who was guiltily conscious of having seen old Croxton driving home from Kingham market in a condition that made his safe arrival at home a great compliment to the character of his horse.

Lady Betty shook her head incredulously. 'And his eyes are all misty and swimming.'

'He was dazzled by the sun.'

'One couldn't see his upper lip,' Lady Betty went on, 'because he wears a moustache. That's an infallible sign, you know.'

'Is it?' asked Sybil, quite impressed by Lady Betty's intimate acquaintance with the marks of intemperance.

'Yes, if the channel in the upper lip is obliterated,

it's a sure sign. I always look out for an obliterated upper lip. No, yours is all right,' as Sybil's finger went up involuntarily to feel the tender, little furrow under her dainty nose. 'I don't think you have the appearance of an habitual drunkard.'

And so the talk ended with a laugh, and the girls went out to see if the strawberries were getting ripe, startling Mademoiselle Lange in a sheltered nook on the terrace, deep in Zola's last.





CHAPTER XXII.

SOMETHING WRONG.

We want more quiet in our work,
More knowledge of the bounds in which we work.

THOSE first days of Lady Betty's residence at Billington Hall, Miss Whateley did not see very much of Sybil. Either Sybil had promised to be there as early as possible after breakfast, or to meet Lady Betty at some point on the property, for one of what Lady Betty called her reconnoitring expeditions, or an imperative, little note arrived with the governess cart to fetch her, or Lady Betty herself descended on Miss Whateley's cottage like an impetuous gale of wind, and swept off Sybil before any expostulations or excuses could be brought forward.

'And why,' as Miss Whateley used to say, 'should they want to find any excuses?'

And, after the first day or two, Sybil said the same,

and Lady Betty had no cause to complain of Sybil's hurrying away, or making vexatious objections when she was wanted.

A little feeling of resentment against Don was making itself felt in the girl's heart, and a painful, little pang of shame lest she should have thought more of that little incident in the wood than there was any cause for, and self-torture that Don thought of her still only as a little girl, the same altogether as the baby child he had played with and petted and carried about and kissed hundreds of times, and that he had thought nothing more of that birthday gift of hers, that had taken her heart with it, than of the baby caresses she used to lavish upon him, and that he had considered the kisses on her hand to mean no more than those he used to bestow on a scratch or a bruise in old days to make the tiny hurt well.

If he had cared, he would have waited that evening till she came in, instead of hurrying off when he had heard that Auntie was not overtired. No, it was evident he had thought no more of what had occurred, while she—as she remembered with hot cheeks and eyes stinging with tears of mortification—had come racing home on the mere chance of seeing him, had gone very near to offending her friend, and, worst of all, had cried her eyes out because she had missed seeing him.

She spoke very plainly to herself over this business, and told herself she was a ridiculous, fanciful, sentimental school-girl, making mountains out of mole-hills, and imagining all sorts of silly meanings in what good, simple, old Don only meant for the usual brotherly, friendly intercourse there had always been between them. Well, at any rate, no one need ever know, and, to punish herself for being such a ridiculous goose, she fell in with all Lady Betty's plans, especially when they took her away at the times when it was most likely Don would come, and she would not hasten her pace, or bestow even as much whip as usual on the fat pony when it was taking her home, and once, when she was almost sure she had seen Bounce's feathery tail waving at Miss Whateley's gate, she let an old woman stop her, and heard every symptom and unpleasant detail of a bad leg to the bitter end before she took her leisurely way home, to find that Bounce's tail had been a delusion, and that there was no one to observe the dignified and utterly unconcerned way in which she came up the garden path.

Sunday he was sure to come; he always went to the afternoon service, and came in to tea afterwards with Miss Whateley and Sybil. She would not acknowledge, even to herself, what a consoling thought this was through the week. I do not know if her suddenly-aroused pride and self-respect would have carried her

so far as to sacrifice this almost certain chance of seeing him, if Lady Betty had pressed her to come over on Sunday afternoon, but she was not put to this proof, for when they parted on Saturday evening, Lady Betty said, 'I suppose I mustn't ask you to come to-morrow. Miss Whateley would not like it.'

And Sybil coloured with the guilty feeling that it was not only Miss Whateley who would not like it.

But she woke next morning with the feeling a child has when it wakes to a whole holiday after a round of school, and was so gay and bright that Miss Whateley was quite touched with the dear child being so cheerful and contented with her poor, dull, old aunt, and again Sybil felt guilty and deceptive, though it was so perfectly true, as she emphasised with kiss after kiss on Miss Whateley's kind, old face.

Sybil's Sunday-school class had never had such a good time of it, or appeared to such advantage. They always got on pretty well together, but to-day they simply beamed on one another, and with some reason on the pupils' side, as they were allowed to make rabbits with their pocket-handkerchiefs, and eat peppermints with impunity, while all the time she was thinking of the lovely, sunny afternoon that was coming every minute nearer, and of how, after tea, while Auntie rested a bit, she and Don would go into

the big meadow at the end of the garden, where the hay was cut and lying in fragrant windrows.

Tom Clare made his rabbit jump right from his arm on to Miss Harrington's lap, and she only smiled down on him with those radiant eyes that seemed full of June sunshine.

The sermon she proclaimed to have been most interesting, though poor little Miss Whateley was overcome by the warmth of the day and the somewhat soothing tone of Mr Cullen's voice and the drowsy hum of the bee in the window near her, and had a few minutes of oblivion and a generally hazy idea of the drift of the sermon, which was mortifying, considering Sybil declared it to have been so eloquent, though I suspect it was something like that sermon Longfellow described :—

‘ Long was the good man’s sermon,
But it seemed not so to me,
For he spoke of Ruth the beautiful,
And still I thought of thee.’

Perhaps that eloquent sermon was the reason why Sybil was so ready for afternoon service, being equipped with hat and gloves and prayer-book at least a quarter of an hour too soon, putting Miss Whateley quite into a fidget with the feeling that she must be late, and must hurry, which led to serious complications over tying bonnet-strings, and a tendency to lose one thing

after another,—glove, spectacle case, pocket-handkerchief, prayer-book, other glove,—till she was in a sadly flurried condition, hardly fit, she was afraid, to go to church at all.

And then, though she had been ready so much too soon, after all, Sybil very nearly made them late in going in, which was a thing almost unknown in Miss Whateley's long chronicle of regular church-going, but which to-day, from one delay after another, very nearly came to pass, so that the bell stopped, and Mr Cullen issued from the vestry almost before Miss Whateley had taken her seat, with Sybil by her side, with the distracting consciousness that the place in the free seats generally occupied by Don was still empty, and that it was impossible to ascertain whether that seat remained empty during the service without craning round in a manner unbecoming and undignified.

There were various late arrivals, it being the fashion with the carter boys to come clattering into church after the service had begun, but none of the sounds quite satisfied Sybil's ear, or allowed her to pay the attention she might otherwise have done, if she had known that one particular seat was occupied. Neither could she do justice to Mr Cullen's sermon, though it was in no way behind his morning discourse, which she had admired so much. She knew he was not there, she told herself afterwards, and yet it was a pang of sharp disappoint-

ment when she turned at the end of the service, before anyone had left the church, and found that Don was not among the worshippers.

And yet, when Miss Whateley put the very question that had been tormenting her all the way home, 'Where was Don? I did not see him at church,' Sybil made half-a-dozen excuses for him, and quite deceived Miss Whateley into the idea that she did not in the least expect him, and, indeed, had quite understood that he would not come, and that it was rather comfortable, for once in a way, to have tea on Sunday all by themselves, so snug and quiet, especially when Sybil had been away at tea-time every evening during the past week.

They sat out in the garden after tea, in the corner of the garden most sheltered from the road, but from which, if you had a mind, you could command a good view of the passers-by; rustic lovers walking out of step, with sheepish faces, in silence; fathers and mothers with perambulators, and children holding on to skirts and coat-tails; parties of hobbledehoyes with canes in their hands and hats on one side and big roses in their button-holes.

Miss Whateley did not think it right to do any gardening on Sunday, and that sitting out in the garden was a time of sore temptation to her, for her eye was sure to espy weeds, or blight, or snails, who seemed

to know that they were privileged on that day, and came out as bold as brass under Miss Whateley's very nose.

So Miss Whateley found the evening rather chilly, and betook herself into the house out of the way of temptation, leaving Sybil sitting there, watching the groups that passed the gate, with a heart growing sadder and sorer every minute; and she sat there till the soft, June dusk fell, and the passers-by grew fewer and not clearly visible as they went by, and the stars came out, one by one, overhead in the great, quiet, blue sky, but nobody stopped at the little gate, and presently Miss Whateley called her in, lest she should catch cold.

'Hawkins has found us some ponies,' Lady Betty announced, when Sybil arrived next day. 'I don't know what sort of creatures they are. I darkly suspect he has taken them off the farm, and we shall find they require "Coom oop," and "Gee whoa," and a carter's whip to make them move, and that they have large, hairy feet—but never mind! we can have the library steps to mount with, and anything is better than driving Dumpling. My arm aches at the very thought of him. So I have told Hawkins to have them ready in half-an-hour, so we will equip ourselves and prepare for the worst.'

The ponies turned out better than her anticipations.

Not much, perhaps, to look at, but good, steady, serviceable, little articles, that scuttled about up hill and down dale, and waited contentedly outside cottage doors, or allowed themselves to be urged to a brisk canter over the grass when their riders were thereto inclined, and even to jumping a brook or a low bank when it pleased Lady Betty to take a short cut across country.

It is not possible at seventeen to be continuously unhappy, with every circumstance, except one, combining to make you otherwise. Even troubles of the heart, which in youth are apt to assume a size altogether out of proportion to their real importance, cannot take all the enjoyment out of beautiful weather, a congenial companion, a pony that answers to the lightest touch on the rein or a coaxing word, and, above all, the bright, hopeful freshness of young blood.

And, after all, Sybil's small vexation about Don did not amount to a love trouble. She had hardly realised to begin with, that it was love at all, and, up till then, and for some time afterwards, she felt sure that it was merely accidental that she and Don did not meet. It had often happened before that stress of circumstances had kept him away sometimes for two or three weeks together, and neither she nor Miss Whateley had thought anything of it.

So, at times, she was able to reason herself into

contentment, and sometimes the contentment came without any reasoning, and Sybil was as childishly light-hearted and happy as ever.

Lady Betty's philanthropic ardour was not at all abated by her discoveries. Indeed, every day added something fresh to her plans for the good of the property,—schools, a dispensary, a village nurse, an institute for young men and lads, a library, an allotment ground, besides all these new cottages that must certainly be built.

It was rather a comfort to Sybil to discover that it did not rest with Lady Betty to effect all these reforms with a stroke of her pen, to sweep away all the pretty, old houses, and put up neat, red-brick cottages with slate roofs, to drain and level and cut down with an entire disregard to the picturesque, and attention merely to the strictly useful and sanitary.

It would all have to wait till Lord Billington's return, and Sybil could not help hoping that he would have more regard for old traditions than Lady Betty had. But, in the meanwhile, it was great fun exploring the estate, setting off in a business-like way in the morning with a little luncheon-basket strapped to their saddles, and a regular route mapped out, farms to be visited, out-of-the-way cottages to be hunted up, boundaries to be discovered.

Sometimes they went quite long distances, and some-

times they missed their way, and wandered about winding lanes or heathy hill-sides, vainly trying to get any lucid directions from the natives, who, in common with many country people, did not seem to have the slightest knowledge of local geography beyond a mile or so of the village where they lived, and, even if they had the knowledge, were utterly unable to convey it intelligibly to anyone else.

The girls would put up their ponies for an hour's rest in the middle of the day at some farm-house, or little wayside inn, or, if none such were to be found, they took off the bridles, and let the ponies have a bite of fresh grass on a common, or the grassy margins of the road, while they sat in some hayfield, or took refuge from the midday heat in a copse. On one occasion they woke from a siesta to find the ponies gone, and had to face the possibility of walking home half-a-dozen miles, but, at a turn in the road, there were Jack and Jill, who had not abused the confidence placed in them, but only wandered on as they ate till they were out of sight.

These explorings never took them in the direction of Colonel Oliphant's land, for the Billington property was separated from his by what, in larger territory, might be called a buffer state of various small holdings, which prevented Colonel Oliphant suffering what he must have endured at close quarters from the Billington ill-

preserved coverts, which were quite a sufficient annoyance to him at a distance.

One day, when they were some way from home, Lady Betty's pony fell lame, and the united wisdom of the two girls was unable to discover the cause, though Lady Betty flattered herself she knew a good deal about the ills that horses are heirs to, and certainly knew more than Sybil, which was nothing at all.

There was a good deal of stony, rough road to traverse before they could reach Billington and Hawkins, and so Sybil rode off towards a cottage she saw across some fields, leaving Lady Betty with poor Jack, who began feeding directly, in spite of his lame foot.

Sybil found the cottage empty, as might have been expected, as all hands were at work in the hayfields just then, as the beautiful weather showed signs of a change, and if there is one proverb more than another that farmers bear in mind, it is to make hay while the sun shines.

She went on further, to where she saw some blue smoke rising from another cottage chimney, which proved the presence of some living creature, but she only found a toothless, old grandmother, very deaf and decrepit, left to mind a couple of babies, while all the rest of the family turned out into the hayfield. The sight of any stranger was so unusual and wonderful,

and especially a stranger in a riding skirt, that she would not let Sybil go till she had made some effort to find out who she was, and what she wanted, or, I had better have said, till Sybil had made the effort by shouting into her ear.

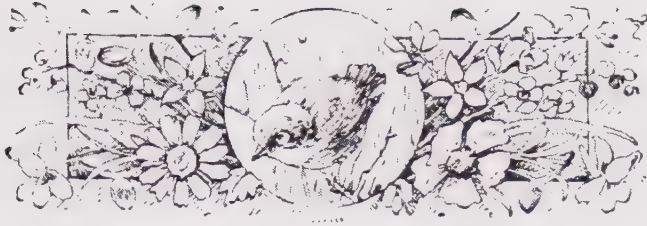
It seemed quite cruel to come away from that eager, old face, full of baffled curiosity, with the veined, crooked, old hand up to her ear, trying to help the poor, failing hearing; but there was plainly no help to be got for Lady Betty there, so she tore herself away, and was just surveying the prospect from the cottage gate, with a view to deciding where she would go next, when Lady Betty appeared, riding on Jack, who was going as usual, without any lameness.

‘It’s all right, Sybby,’ she said, when she was within hearing; ‘almost directly you were gone, a man came along the road, and I asked him to look at Jack’s foot, and he saw in a minute that it was a thorn, quite a big one, under the frog, and he had it out in a minute, and bathed Jack’s foot in the stream, and he was all right. He was a handy sort of man, though a little bit surly in his manner. I think he must have been a keeper, for he had a beautiful, red setter with him. And oh, Sybil, have you your purse in your pocket? I found I had left mine at home, and I want to give the man a shilling. I told him to wait till I came back. Oh, he hasn’t thought it worth while to wait for it. There he

goes down the hill. Some of the people about here are mighty independent.'

There was no mistaking the broad, velveteen shoulders disappearing so rapidly over the turn of the hill, even if Sybil could have mistaken Bounce, who followed, as usual, at Don's heels.



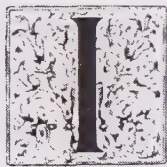


CHAPTER XXIII.

THE EARL.

From virtue first began
The difference that distinguished man from man ;
He claim'd no title from descent of blood
But that which made him noble, made him good.

DRYDEN.



It was the middle of July when Lord Billington made his appearance. Lady Betty had been more than a month at the Hall, and had pretty well explored all the holes and corners of the estate, which, after many years of indifference and neglect, presented a most satisfactory field for an ardent reformer to set to work on.

Perhaps Lady Betty was too much inclined to put everything down on her list of grievances and abuses and mismanagement. She did not allow anything for the natural tendency to grumbling, nor for drink, nor for invincible ignorance in such matters as cooking, thrift, and hygiene, which defy all the efforts of County

Council and South Kensington lecturers, and must be taken into account when trying to improve the conditions of the agricultural labourer.

But perhaps it is as well that the pioneer of any social reform should not be too clear-sighted about the *cons*, but should enthusiastically preach the *pros*, and ignore the lions in the way.

So Lady Betty was not disturbed by any doubt as to the advisability of stirring up the mud, and she was so sure that everything could and would be set right when Billington came home, that Sybil began to think of him as a sort of enchanter, who had only to wave a wand, or speak a few magic words, to turn the Billington estate into a perfect little heaven below.

But certainly, when he made his first appearance on the scene, he did not at all impress Sybil with being possessed of any magic power, or, indeed, with much power at all.

The manner of his arrival was on this wise. The two girls were just starting for a walk when Betty remembered a note that it was imperatively necessary to write, and ran back to do so, while Sybil waited for her, sitting on the broad stone steps leading to the front door.

Billington is a fine, old house, built of grey stone enamelled by stains of time and damp, by moss and lichen, with all manner of rich colours. It forms, with

its two wings, three sides of a square, with rows of mullioned windows looking down on the broad square of gravel, from which the wide, shallow steps lead up to the entrance, surmounted by a great, heavy, triangular pediment, and flanked on each side by a grotesque stone lion bearing a shield displaying the Billington arms. Half of these steps was already in shadow, as the afternoon was advancing, and the sun was behind the big chimney-stack of the west wing, and in this shadow Sybil had seated herself with her back against the pedestal of the lion, and Betty's collie had come to share the patch of shade with her, resting its silken, black and tan head on her lap.

She made a very pretty picture to anyone coming up to the house, and the effect was not lost on a young man who just then turned the corner of the drive and came in sight of the front of the house, though he was short-sighted, and had to screw an eye-glass into one eye to take in the details.

He was not at all an imposing-looking young man, being short and decidedly dusty as to the boots, and limp as to the collar, but as he was making for the front entrance, Sybil concluded that he must be a caller, unless, indeed, which was more than probable, he had come to see the pictures, that being the afternoon in the week when visitors were allowed to come, and Mrs Light showed them round.

But Mrs Light was laid up, as Sybil knew, with one of her bad, bilious headaches, and Betty had laughingly proposed that, if anyone came to see the pictures, she or Sybil should escort them round, and had practised a very good imitation of Mrs Light's parrot-like enumeration of names, dates, painters, &c.

It did seem a pity, Sybil thought, to have come for nothing, such a hot, dusty day too, and she resolved to let him walk round, and perhaps she could point out the principal pictures, the Vandykes, Gainsboroughs and Sir Joshua Reynolds', till Lady Betty was ready to start.

He raised his hat as he approached, and she rose with one hand still on Prince's head, to prevent any demonstrations on the part of the dog at the sight of a stranger.

'Have you an order,' she asked, 'for seeing the pictures? I am so sorry—Mrs Light, the housekeeper, who generally shows visitors round, is ill, but if you would like to go through the rooms, perhaps I——'

And there she stopped, for an amused look on the visitor's face gave her a quick perception that she had made a mistake, and the next minute the unmistakable likeness to Betty showed that it could be none other than Lord Billington.

'Oh, I beg your pardon,' she exclaimed, crimson with

confusion. 'I am so sorry. You are Lord Billington——'

'And you, I am sure, are Miss Harrington, that I recollect as a little girl when I was here last. It is I who should beg pardon, and be sorry for turning up in this unexpected way, and in such a disreputable condition of dust and heat. I had forgotten that it was so far from the station. Is Betty at home? Oh, there is no hurry. If you don't mind, I think I will rest a little before I go in. You look so delightfully cool in the shadow here, after that blazing high road.'

And he seated himself on one of the steps, while Sybil resumed her seat at the base of the lion, with Prince's head on her lap, gradually recovering her composure, while Lord Billington talked in a pleasant, natural way, that very soon made her feel at home with him.

He was very like Betty, only without the redeeming points in her face of good eyes and well-marked eyebrows. He had a plain, little, sensible, freckled face like hers, and was of much the same build as she was, short and thick-set, altogether not at all like what Sybil had imagined an earl would be. If this was a good average specimen of the House of Lords, Sybil felt that her respect for one of the three estates of the realm had been a good deal shaken. His eyes, too, were, as I have said, short-sighted, and, into one of them, he

wore an eye-glass screwed, which required a fearful contortion of the face to fix into position, and which had a trick of suddenly falling out at unexpected moments, which startled anyone not used to its vagaries.

But, all the same, it was quite a pleasant face, and when Sybil had got over her disappointment, she acknowledged to herself that she liked this very undignified, little earl.

It was the first time she had met any young man, except Don, above the rank of the village folk or young farmers. Mr Cullen, to be sure, was not what would be called old, but, to eyes of seventeen, anyone the other side of thirty seems hopelessly antiquated, and he had known Sybil as a little girl, and treated her still as such, though she looked down from her slim height on the little parson. Dr Parkinson, too, from Kingham, though still a young spark in his own estimation, was rather bald, and had more waistcoat than befits youthful grace, and, when he met Sybil, would pat her cheek and call her 'my dear.' The young farmers were shy and boorish, and a little in awe of Sybil, who carried with her that curious little air of distinction that in earlier days had exasperated Mrs Grant, and, more than once since, had made people declare her to be stuck-up and proud.

So Lord Billington's ease of manner and very

ordinary politeness struck her more than it otherwise might, and perhaps she was not unconscious (what pretty girl is?) that the glances, that came now and then through the eye-glass in her direction, were not disapproving, though they might, of course, have been meant for Prince, who was a handsome collie, and well bred.

By-and-bye, when she got over her shyness, she found out that he was not at all difficult to talk to, and quick to understand what she meant, and more sympathetic than Betty, who had a certain blunt directness of mind that did not always fit in readily with other people's.

Betty was long in coming. It was one of her idiosyncrasies to fit in little, stray jobs into corners of time that did not quite contain them, and, accordingly, to steal other little corners of time that properly belonged to something else. She had a great idea of using up odds and ends of time that other people wasted, and, allowing no margin for her occupation, they were apt to jar and interfere with one another. For instance, she had some knitting to do while she was waiting for dinner to be announced, so most days the dinner was kept waiting while she finished a row, or cast off some stitches. So, this afternoon, she wrote half-a-dozen notes while Sybil waited for her, and, at the end of half-an-hour, came running out in a desperate hurry, pulling

on her gloves, and calling to Sybil to make haste, or they would not have time to do half they intended before tea.

And there she found Lord Billington and Sybil, sitting on the steps in the shadow, talking as comfortably as if they had known each other for years.

‘What ! Bill ?’ she exclaimed.

‘Your very humble servant.’

They did not go for their walk after all, neither was Sybil allowed to go home, as she made a desperate effort to do, feeling that the brother and sister must want to be alone, and that she must be very much *de trop*, but they did not seem to find her so, and she soon lost the feeling that she was, during the pleasant afternoon spent under the big cedar in the garden, where tea was brought out to them, and where Lord Billington ate bread and jam like a schoolboy, and laughed in rather a high-pitched key, and let his eye-glass fall out with a click every two or three minutes. Mademoiselle Lange sat by in her snug, little, cushioned wicker chair, with her neat, little, French feet on a foot-stool, to keep them from the damp, and nodded and smiled and twinkled her bright, little black eyes, though she did not hear half that was said, being more than a little deaf, and supremely anxious that no one should find it out. I am afraid that Lady Betty rather ignored her, but she was a kind, old creature, and was well content

if she was kept well supplied with French novels, and her coffee was properly made, and Betty saw to these small requirements, and did not worry her about taking exercise either of body or mind.

Lord Billington gave an amusing account of his very informal arrival without being recognised by anyone. During his walk from Kingham, one carter with a big, yellow waggon, on which was painted the earl's own name, had offered him a lift, and asked him to stand a drink in return at the Billington Arms. After that, a girl, driving an obstreperous pig, had hailed him, and demanded his help to drive it to its destination. 'You don't know how difficult it is, Miss Harrington, to drive a pig. I never thoroughly understood the meaning of pig-headed till to-day.' And then one of his own tenants had shouted to him that he was trespassing when he crossed a field, and, even in his own garden, one of the men had scowled at him, and said, 'This ain't the way to the back door, and Muster Jones he don't allow no one to come into his garden, leave alone as 'twere upon business.'

'I shall have that gardener promoted, Betty, if Muster Jones will allow of such interference in *his* garden. And then the culminating point was reached when I arrived at the door of my own paternal mansion. Miss Harrington received me as an excursionist come to see the pictures, and told

me Mrs Light was ill, and offered to take me round.'

You see, by this time, Lord Billington and Sybil were on such good terms that he could venture to make a joke of the mistake she had made, without bringing the hot blood tingling into her cheeks, or tears pricking dangerously near her eyes.

'I shall keep you to your promise, Miss Harrington, to show me the pictures. It is the only reparation you can make for mistaking me for a "'Arry."'





CHAPTER XXIV.

A BEAD RING.

Oh thrush ! 'tis easy to sing all day
That riotous love-song merry and arch.
But what if your love were away ?

K. TYNAN.



THE few days that Lord Billington spent at the Park passed very brightly and happily, and Sybil was constrained to confess she enjoyed herself, in spite of the constant little disquiet in her heart at Don's continual absence, and her uncertainty as to whether it were accidental or intentional that they had never met once since they parted that evening of his birthday, a parting, the thought of which, even now, brought the soft colour flushing in her cheeks, and made her look at the little hand as if the mark of those burning kisses might yet remain. Sometimes she would persuade herself that it was merely an accident that he always

happened to come and see Miss Whateley (for come he did) when she was away.

Miss Whateley evidently had not the slightest suspicion of any malice prepense, but always lamented over it, and said how provoking it was, and how disappointing for Don, and how unusually arduous his duties were this year. She did not wish to be hard on anyone, she said, but she could not help thinking that Fry was a bit lazy. It ran in the family of the Frys to be idle; she remembered the same in his father and grandfather before him, and, of course, if the under-keeper scamped his work, it threw more on the head-keeper, and Don was so conscientious he could not bear to let anything be neglected, even though it was another man's business to see to it.

And Sybil would agree, and not trouble Miss Whateley's simple mind with the suggestion that Fry had been under-keeper the year before, when Don was not so much taken up by his work but what he could come in two or three times in the week, and hardly ever failed to appear at afternoon service on Sunday, and come in to tea afterwards.

But, as I have said, in spite of this little rankling vexation, which was a very real pain, small as it may appear, Sybil was bound to allow that life was very pleasant with Lady Betty at the Park, and she

candidly confessed that it was all the pleasanter with Lord Billington there.

She liked him very much. He was so amusing and easy to talk to, and good-natured. He so enjoyed the easy, simple life without any state or ceremony, living in the west wing, and spending most of the hot summer days under the cedars in the garden, or lying in a punt on the piece of water in the Park, under the willows, or riding with the girls about the lanes, or playing tennis with them when the sun was off the velvet, close-cut lawn.

It was his holiday time, he said. The serious business of life would begin in terrible earnest next month, when he would come of age, and Lady Billington would come down like a wolf on the fold, and the house would be filled with guests, and he would have to sit at the end of that awful dining table, through interminable dinners, with appalling dowagers on either side of him, to whom he would have to do the agreeable, and talk all the rest of the evening to young ladies, *fin de siècle* and painfully up-to-date, whose society jargon he should not understand, and to young men with whom he would have nothing on earth in common. And then there would be all the business part of it, lawyers and agents and leases and deeds and endless botherations, and all sorts of grievances and discontent, and things to be rectified, 'which is the sort of thing that Betty

might enjoy, but I'm more of Hamlet's way of thinking,—“The world is out of joint, oh! cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right.” And then there are the politics, and I shall have to conceal the disgraceful fact that I don't know anything about them, and care less. And I shall have terrible, keen, old men button-holing me, and putting me through my paces, or, worse still, old ladies, primrose dames, with hook noses, fixing me with their basilisk eyes, and finding out that one does not care a button which party is in power, and that one has no opinions on any of the vital questions of the day. And there will be all the entertainments, and hullabaloo about my coming of age—long tenants' dinners, with a good deal of strong beer, followed by punch, and I shall have to make speeches, and shake hands with everybody. And then there will be what is called in these parts a “feet,” with tents and evergreen arches and flags and cannons fired and cricket and games and tea and fireworks.'

All this was poured into Sybil's sympathetic ear, while Betty listened, partly amused and partly exasperated, but not quite as much as she would have been a month ago, for, though she would stoutly have denied the charge, her philanthropy was a little bit cooling down, and tennis had somewhat superseded her interest in drainage.

'And then there will be the ball!' groaned Lord

Billington, but here Sybil could not conscientiously agree with him.

‘Do you mean to say you like balls?’

‘I have never been to one.’

‘Do you like dancing?’

‘I love it,’ was the very emphatic answer.

‘Do you really?’ and Lord Billington stuck in his eye-glass to look up at her, as if he doubted the sincerity of the statement, and let it drop with the customary click, and the feeling that perhaps a waltz with her might be more than endurable.

She was standing under the willow by the lake, with one little foot on the edge of the punt in which he lay extended on cushions in lazy luxury, and certainly, with the softly-moving shadow of the willow on her hair and dress, and the sunny reflection of the water on her face, she made as pretty a picture as you could wish to see.

‘I tell you what, Sybil,’ Lady Betty said—she was reaching after forget-me-nots within earshot of the conversation,—‘I tell you what. I suppose I shall be allowed to appear at Bill’s ball, though I am not emancipated yet, and, if I am, you shall come too, and we’ll have dresses alike. It’s awfully good of me to suggest it, for you will take the shine out of me shockingly. I’ll make Granny give us both our dresses, really pretty ones. And when Bill has done all his duty dances, he shall come and dance with us for a

treat, and take us both out to have ices. Do you know, Bill, Sybil has never tasted an ice. Think of that!’

Upon which, Lord Billington rose up with alacrity, declaring such a state of things must not be allowed to continue for another hour, and, in a few minutes, they were in the governess cart on the way to Kingham, where Lady Betty maintained there was a confectioner to be found.

But, on arriving there, it appeared that ices were only made on market days, so they had to return disappointed.

‘Would you mind stopping for a minute,’ Sybil said, as they were driving out of the town, and Lord Billington immediately pulled up the fat pony, who only too gladly stood still, in front of a little shop of very humble appearance, in the window of which were displayed tops and marbles, Dutch dolls and cheap toys and glass bottles of sugar sticks and peppermints.

‘What are you going to buy there, Sybil?’ Lady Betty asked, in surprise. ‘Are you going to buy me a doll and Billington a top?’

But Sybil had seen a wooden box full of beads in one corner of the window, blue and red and yellow and green, measured out by a large thimble, a thimbleful for a halfpenny. You could not get such in Hayhurst, and they were the very sort she wanted, like half-a-

dozen she kept so carefully in paper in a corner of her purse.

And, after this purchase, Sybil's interest in the ball, which had risen almost to excitement before, seemed to have gone, though Lady Betty talked of the dress, and Lord Billington of the music and flowers, and drew a picture of brilliancy and light and colour that might well have dazzled her imagination.

But, to tell the truth, she was thinking of a bead ring she was going to make, and of a certain little experiment she was going to try, the success of which was infinitely more interesting to her than all the balls in the world.

'Why, Sybby,' Miss Whateley said that evening, 'I thought it was only babies who threaded beads.'

'I think I shall always be a baby, Auntie,' the girl said, 'anyhow to you.' And she came across to her favourite seat on the arm of Miss Whateley's chair, and put her arm round the old lady's neck, and coaxed and petted her, and arranged her cap-strings, and stroked back the little, stray, silver hairs that her kisses had ruffled on the quiet, old forehead.

She had a bead ring again on her finger, as she had that night after Don's birthday, but this time it was so big that two of her little, slim fingers were enclosed by it.

And, next morning, when Lady Betty came to fetch

her, she put that large bead ring on a corner of the window sill, close to where anybody's eyes might come when sitting on the chair by the window, which was a very usual seat in summer time when the fire was not lighted, and when there was no occasion to draw up the three-legged stool to a warm corner.

'What are you thinking of?' Lady Betty asked more than once as they played tennis, and, I am afraid, sometimes she spoke with a little asperity, for wool-gathering thoughts do not do at tennis, and the two girls were, or should have been, straining every nerve to beat Lord Billington, who had been offensively successful hitherto in their contests.

And he, too, would have liked to know what she was thinking of, that made her eyes so softly bright, and dimpled her cheek into a tender, little smile quite unconnected with the vicissitudes of the game, which, owing to her wandering thoughts, was more likely to induce frowns than smiles, and actually produced that effect on Lady Betty. But he never associated it with the thimbleful of beads bought in Kingham the day before.

'Has Don been here?' Sybil asked, when she came in that evening.

'Yes, he came in just after tea for a few minutes.'

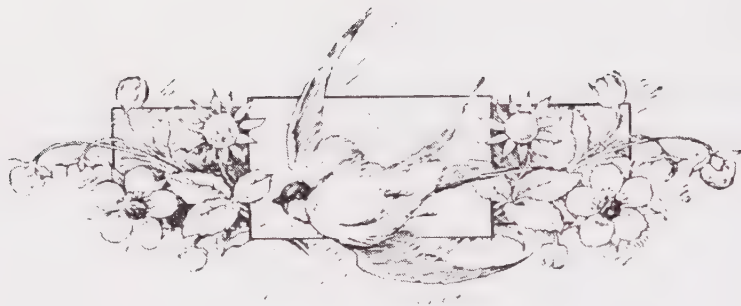
'I thought so.'

'Did you, my dear? How did you know?'

But Sybil only laughed as she stood by the window with her hands on the sill from which the bead ring had disappeared, and Miss Whateley thought she had never seen her so bright and gay, singing about the house and playing with Shaver, who was a sedate and serious-minded cat, and did not approve of such frivolous behaviour.

‘It is so nice for her to have young companions,’ Miss Whateley said to herself. ‘It is a bit dull for a child being always with an old woman, and Don is so much occupied now.’





CHAPTER XXV.

DON'S REASONS.

And scarcely over land and sea,
And scarce in Paradise might be
Such dreams, the while the blackbird trilled,
His throat with musk and honey filled,
Songs of love from the chestnut tree.

K. TYNAN.

I 'THINK,' Don said to himself next Sunday, 'I think I might go to church.' He was contemplating a bead ring which was just big enough to go on his little finger, and which he had taken out of his pocket-book and fitted on, as he sat out in his verandah after dinner, with Bounce stretched at his feet.

It was not by any means the first time he had taken it out and tried it on and looked at it, since he had taken it up from the window sill at Miss Whateley's, and, with a sad want of honesty, had appropriated it, without either with your leave or by your leave to

Miss Whateley, who might be supposed to be the owner of the article. He could not possibly have thought that it was his own property, that birthday gift of which he had been despoiled, for that was hardly half the size.

And though, when that was taken from him, he had protested that he should never like another half so well, he would have maintained now, in the face of any gainsayer, this was of infinitely greater worth, though, as regards its intrinsic value, it had only taken a very small proportion of the halfpenny thimbleful of beads to make it.

Do you think, if that ring had been made of diamonds and emeralds, rubies and sapphires, as Sybil in her childish days used to imagine her beads to be, Don would have valued it more? It was like a drop of water to lips parched with agonising thirst; it was like a little ray of light breaking the leaden clouds that seemed to have settled permanently down on life's gloomy day; it was like a touch of balm to stop for a minute the dull ache of hopeless longing.

Don's was a very simple nature, and so life had not the complications it presents to most of us. Right was right, and wrong was wrong, black and white, with no intermediate shades of grey, which are so perplexing in this unintelligible world.

Of course, this made it easier for him to rule his

conduct. It was merely a question of turning to the right or left, and he had no pleasant, little bye-paths just skirting what is right, but yet certainly not leading in the direction of what is wrong, at least not directly, and there is always a stile or a gap in the hedge, if you don't overlook it, by which you can get back into the right path again safe enough.

He had no convenient excuses for himself, and, for the matter of that, not many for other people, which deficiency earned him more respect than liking. He was reckoned a 'straight' man, but, it was often added, 'a bit hard on a chap.'

Don had been very 'straight' with himself that night after his birthday, and perhaps he had been 'a bit hard' on that poor fool of a chap, Don Grant, who had come back from his parting with Sybil at Miss Whateley's door in a sort of delirium of wild happiness.

Don had more than once held the reins of a runaway horse, and had felt the mad strain and pull of the great, powerful beast beyond all control. But, on each occasion, he had brought the creature to reason, and had left it quivering and subdued, with its head hanging down and its legs trembling, and the foam and sweat on its flanks, and its nostrils working as the breath came panting and jerking, and it would follow meekly at Don's heel, with all the spirit and pluck gone out of it.

It was much the same sort of conflict Don had that night in the woods with himself, with that passionate love that was running away with him, seemingly without any power of control, from his reason or conscience. 'Needs must,' they say, 'when the devil drives,' which is a cowardly and untrue axiom, as there is no must in the matter, and is generally the excuse for going the way we want to, and making a pretence that we can't help it.

I don't think most men would have been so 'straight' with themselves as Don. I think many would have asked, and asked in all sincerity, 'Why shouldn't I love Sybil and make her love me?' and many would have answered, 'Why not?'

But when Don applied for Colonel Oliphant's situation as keeper, that gentleman had asked him if he understood what he was doing, and when Don had declared himself indifferent to any of the rubs and snubs consequent on the change in his social standing, Colonel Oliphant had said, 'It's all very well just now, but when there's a girl in the question you'll sing a different tune. You'll look for a wife in your own rank, and how will a young lady look at a game-keeper? and, worse still, how will her people look at him?'

Don had shrugged his shoulders at the time, but the words came back to him now in all their full signifi-

cance. True there were no relations to look scornfully on his suit. Nothing had ever been heard of father and mother since Sybil first came, a baby child, to Miss Whateley's, and the presumption was they were dead, and Miss Whateley was not one to look scornfully on anyone, and always had been specially good to him.

But was it right to take advantage of these circumstances, and of Sybil's utter inexperience?

It was in his power to make her love him, he was sure of that. That little, soft kiss of hers was thrilling through him now, making every pulse throb and beat. There was something more in that kiss, he knew it, than in the many baby kisses she had lavished upon him in old days.

But it was not too late to stop, at least not for her, and he must reckon the cost for her if it was to go on. He could not leave it to her as he might to another girl, with a father and mother and wise counsellors to watch over her, and who had seen other men of her own rank, and might yet, on due consideration and with advice, elect to take this young gamekeeper, who, though indeed he was a gentleman's son, had given up his rank as a gentleman.

She had seen no one else; she had no one to advise her but Miss Whateley, who was not wise in this world's wisdom. She was such a dainty, delicate, little

lady, every inch of her, not a fine lady, which is hardly to be reckoned a lady at all, but a sweet and gracious gentlewoman. Not that Don made such distinctions in words, but felt it all in that heart he was trying to get in hand that night in the woods, such a pure, sweet, June night, pure and sweet as this little lady-love of his, with the trees, shorn of all their gay variety of green, black against the spangled vault of heaven, all around him the soft, subdued, mysterious noises of the night, a rustle and thrill of passing wings, the cry of a night bird, the boom of a cockchafer, the sleepy chirp of a bird, a squeak, the crack of a branch, altogether making up a silence that is almost solemn.

She was fitted for any position, however high. She was meant to live in a great house, and be waited upon hand and foot, and wear beautiful clothes and jewels; and in due time no doubt she would, if only he could curb in that runaway horse, whose hard mouth pulled and fretted beyond restraint.

It was he who must put an end to the thing, for he felt sure, and oh! the exquisite joy that the thought brought, mingled with the anguish, that there was in the girl's heart a feeling that must be nipped in the bud, if it were to be prevented from blossoming out into a love answering to his love for her.

It was within his grasp to seize the most precious

treasure of her love. He had but to stretch out his arms to have it, and yet, so great was his love, that he pinioned those great, strong, loving arms to his side, and forced himself to open the hand that seemed, even now, closing on the treasure, to open it and let it go.

‘He could make her happy,’ whispered some tempting voice. Yes, he could. She had said, only two or three hours ago, how sorry she was that the day was over, and how she wished she were always up there with him.

It did not do to think of what that life might be, and how he would ‘compass her with sweet observances,’ so that the wind should not blow too roughly on her, or the sun venture too boldly to touch her cheek. He had no fear but what he could make her happy, but how could he bear to see her dragged down to be a poor, working man’s wife, shut out from all intercourse with her equals, looked down upon by girls who were her inferiors in every way. And perhaps, some day, who could tell? some polished, cultured, educated gentleman might happen her way, and she would turn on her rough, ignorant, boorish husband with a look,—it would only be a look, she was too gentle and sweet for more,—but a look of reproach would be enough to break his heart.

And so, when the first grey streaks of dawn showed

themselves in the east, and the trees began to remember that they were green, and the stars, which had changed their places wonderfully while this wrestling had been going on, turned pale and slipped insensibly out of sight, and a dewy mist hung over the meadows, and low calls from the bushes announced that the birds were waking, Don climbed the path to his cottage with that restive horse well under control, more haggard than a night's watch would account for in one so used to watching, and with a stern look in his face that made Bounce, more than once that morning, glance up at him and sniff uneasily at his gaiters, with that quick sense of any trouble in one they love, which dogs possess.

He had made up his mind that no selfish love of his should drag Sybil down, but that she should be free to rise when the occasion came, as it assuredly would, to refined, cultured, elegant life, such as she was suited for. She would soon forget that little episode in the woods, and need be none the poorer, though he was so infinitely the richer, for that little, fluttering, rose-leaf kiss.

So he went down to Hayhurst in the evening, resolved to be simply and unmistakably the old playmate, brotherly Don, who had romped and played with her without any ceremony, and without any sentiment, and perhaps take less pains than he had done of late to

conceal the roughness and boorishness that put quite out of the question that midsummer madness of the evening before.

I do not know how these resolutions would have stood the meeting with Sybil. I doubt his being brotherly if she had blushed at his coming; I altogether disbelieve in his being rough or boorish if she had smiled at him; I have misgivings if sentiment could have been kept at bay if their eyes had once met.

But, as we have seen, his resolution was not put to the test, and the news of Lady Betty's return, and the prospect of Sybil being a good deal with her, suggested to his mind that perhaps the most effectual way of putting an end to all his happiness, which was the one object to be aimed at at present and the safest way for him, was to keep entirely away, and not meet Sybil again till the memory of what had passed in the wood had faded from her mind, or been obliterated by all the new interests that the coming of Lady Betty would bring into her life.

He could not keep quite away from Hayhurst, as he at first intended to do, and perhaps on this point he was not quite as 'straight' with himself as he was in most matters, for he made Miss Whateley the reason for his visits, which was only partly true, though he timed his coming very carefully to avoid any chance

of seeing Sybil, and more than once turned back at the entrance to the village because an old man crippled with rheumatism, who sat all day at his cottage door eagerly noting the passers-by, could not be certain that he had seen little Missy pass along on her way to Billington.

I do not think, either, that he carried back much memory of Miss Whateley's gentle, old words, except in so far as they concerned Sybil, but only the memory of how Sybil's workbox stood on the table with the bit of work on which she had been occupied, or how a book was left open where she had been reading, or her gloves on the end of the sofa, or a bunch of flowers she had arranged in a glass, or a rose—and this, I think, he took away with him, though Miss Whateley begged him to have a nice bunch of fresh ones from the garden, for this was half-withered, having been picked to pin in the front of her dress, and having fallen out in the hurry of departure.

Now and then he caught a glimpse of her riding about with Lady Betty, and once, as we have seen, he nearly came face to face with her, when he could not decently refuse to come to the rescue when Jack had fallen lame.

But that month had seemed endless to him, and if it had not been for hearing of her from Miss Whateley, he did not know how he could have got through the

interminable days, of which the Sundays, which used to be the happiest, were now the dullest and most tiresome.

But that Sunday, as I have said, he looked at the bead ring, and thought he would go to church. She had meant it for him. She had not forgotten him. She had placed it where she knew he would find it. There was no sentiment meant. Little Sybil at six had made a bead ring for good, old Don, and this was just the same sort of thing.

It was all set right again. Perhaps, after all, he had made himself unnecessarily miserable over what was only a trifle to her, and he might have gone back to the pleasant, easy terms, without inflicting on himself that long, dreary month of loneliness.

Yes, he would go down to church, and in to tea with Miss Whateley afterwards. And what a really beautiful day it was, not too hot, and with those great, soft masses of cloud, and everything so fresh after that sudden, little shower of rain, quite different from the hot, dusty, glaring weather there had been of late.

So Don told himself, maligning the lovely June days which even those inveterate grumblers, the farmers, allowed to be 'pretty middlin'.'

There were some apricots ripe, too, on the sunny, little bit of wall at the end of the cottage, a warm, soft, maize

colour, with streaks and flecks of scarlet where the sun had kissed them.

These were always Sybil's, and most years she had come up to pick them herself, and Don had gloomily resolved this year to let them drop off, and rot on the ground. But now he picked them daintily, and packed them in a little basket with their own leaves, while Bounce gazed respectfully at a distance, never having forgotten the worst beating he had ever had, when, as a puppy, he had scratched at the root of that special tree, with serious risk of fatally wounding the tender bark, and, ever since, he had been conscious of an impassable fence around the sacred spot which was not discernible to others.

That Sunday afternoon continued fair and bright till close upon half-past-three, just when the chimes of Hayhurst church ended, and the single bell began tolling in. It is well to be accurate in reports of the weather, and some people would have maintained that the beauty of the weather continued undiminished all day, whereas, for Don, heavy clouds gathered at that time which obscured all sunshine for him, not only for that day but for many subsequent ones.

The sun was shining on his father's grave as he passed in, and on the wreath of fresh flowers which Sybil never failed to place there on Sunday.

Don, as we have seen, was not sociable in his habits;

so he kept aloof from the group under the yew tree, who were having their weekly 'crack' over local news.

Miss Whateley and Sybil were always early for church, so he did not expect to see them coming along the path by the Vicarage wall, and was not looking that way, and he stood aside, without taking particular notice, to allow two people coming from that direction to pass.

'Can you tell me which is Miss Harrington's seat in church?' a girl's voice asked, and he recognised Lady Betty, and, by her side, there was no mistaking the likeness, her brother, Lord Billington.

'A little, affected, contemptible puppy,' Don hastily summed him up, as he scowled down from his six foot two on the little Earl with his eye-glass, hardly on a level with Don's shoulder.

'What a splendid-looking young fellow!' was Lord Billington's return comment, as he and his sister went into church, and made their way to the seat which Don had gruffly indicated, where Sybil sat alone, while Don turned and strode away from the churchyard, recklessly swinging the basket of apricots which he had carried so gingerly down to Hayhurst.

'I may as well leave them for Miss Whateley,' he said, resisting the temptation to turn them out into the nearest ditch, and he went in at the gate, meaning to

leave the little basket on the doorstep, knowing that, by the invariable custom of the house, there would be no one at home, as it had not been known, within the memory of mortal man, that Miss Whateley should be anywhere but in church on Sunday afternoon, and Maria having her afternoon out with her young man.

But this time Don was reckoning without his host, for, as he tramped up the path, with no attempt at stealth, to what he imagined was an empty house, the door opened, and Miss Whateley herself met him.

She had not been very well, she said, and Sybil had persuaded her to stop at home, and, indeed, she felt very queer in church in the morning, and was almost afraid she would have to come out, a thing she had never done in her life, and could not bear to do, disturbing all the congregation, and making such a fuss. But she was quite right now, and she felt dreadfully wicked not to be in church.

She certainly did not look at all well, and Don's ill-temper was softened, so far as to come in and sit with her a bit, with the firm resolution to be gone long before there was any chance of Sybil's coming in.

But again he was out in his reckoning. Whether Mr Cullen's sermon was shorter than usual that afternoon, or whether Don had miscalculated the general length of the service, just as he was thinking it was time to

be going, the gate opened, and steps of more than one person came up the garden, and before Don had time to beat a retreat, as he had on former emergencies done, by the back door, Sybil stood there, and without seeing Don, who was sitting behind the door, said, 'Auntie, Betty and Lord Billington want to know if you will give them a cup of tea?'





CHAPTER XXVI.

INVITATIONS TO THE BALL.

Workmen up at the Hall : they are coming back from abroad.
The dark, old place will be gilt by the touch of a millionaire.

TENNYSON.



THE country round Billington was in great commotion that summer at the prospect of the coming of age of the Earl, and all the festivities that were to celebrate that event, and it was also reported that he was going to live there permanently, at any rate for the greater part of the year.

The house had been so long empty, that it had fallen out of reckoning in society ways, and the only use Billington Hall had been in the county was as an object for a drive to see the pictures, or as a place for excursions to come to when they had obtained leave to feed and disport themselves in the Park, leaving sandwich papers and ginger-beer bottles as mementos of their visits.

But now, if Billington Hall was going to take its rightful place in society, it would make a great alteration in the county. Those who had hitherto figured as local magnates, Colonel Oliphant among them, would be relegated quite to the second rank, and all they had hitherto done for the entertainment of the neighbourhood would be eclipsed by the doings at the Hall.

It was known that the Billington estates had been heavily mortgaged through the extravagance of the present Earl's father and grandfather, but the long minority must have done much to improve matters, and it was understood that Lord Billington had no taste for horse-racing, and was disposed to settle down as a country gentleman on his estates.

And, besides opening the Hall for social purposes, the Earl himself set the heart of many a mother with marriageable daughters in a flutter. There were really so few eligible bachelors in the neighbourhood, and the few there were got so outrageously conceited by being made so much of and run after, that it was only the terrible competition in the matrimonial race that made mothers or daughters put up with them, and the Earl's coming would set them delightfully a good many pegs down, and teach them not to give themselves such insufferable airs.

Lord Billington's little visit to the Hall had been of a purely private character. He had arrived, as we have

seen, in a very informal way, and no one knew of his being there, and he left quite as informally, jogging over to Kingham in the governess cart with the fat, old pony, who took it so very easily, in spite of Betty's flagellation, that the train was in the station when they reached the hill leading up to it, and Lord Billington had to jump out, hauling his portmanteau with him, and run for it.

Lady Betty did not stop long at Billington after her brother left, being turned out by an inroad of workmen, who arrived to get the house into habitable condition, and from that time preparations went on fast and furiously, and paragraphs appeared in the local papers describing the alterations and improvements that were in hand, and in one of the London illustrated papers there was a picture of the old house, and a sketch of the past history of the family, which Betty sent down to Sybil to read.

Sybil had been entrusted with the care of Prince, Lady Betty's collie, much to the aggravation of Shaver, who lived in a chronic state of hair on end and bolster tail, and had ultimately to go on a visit to Maria's mother, as Prince's gentle eyes were in hourly peril.

'I wonder how he will get on with Bounce?' Miss Whateley said from time to time, but the matter was never put to the test, for, after his hasty departure that Sunday afternoon, with hardly a greeting to Sybil or

muttered good-bye to Miss Whateley, Don did not come again, though once Sybil saw him stalk past the house, and more than once they saw Bounce in the distance when she and Miss Whateley were out walking, proof positive that Don was not far off, though he kept out of sight.

Sybil was a good deal hurt and puzzled by Don's behaviour, and more than once she determined she would go up to his cottage and have it out with him, and make him tell her what was the matter, and what he was angry about. A few months ago she would have done this without thinking twice, but now, somehow, the memory of Don's birthday made her feel as if she could never be on the same frank, simple terms with him again.

She had long suspected that Lady Betty's being at Billington had something to do with Don's keeping away, and she was the more convinced of this after that meeting on Sunday, when Don had glowered at the Earl and his sister as if he could have murdered them; so there was this alleviation when Betty left, though she certainly missed her very much, that perhaps that jealous, disagreeable, old Don would come round now, and not stop sulking up there in the keeper's cottage like a bear with a sore head.

But Don did not come any the more after Lady Betty's departure than he had before, and Sybil had

something else to think of, for at seventeen—and seventeen years passed mostly in the quietest of country villages—a ball is a very absorbing subject of thought, even in a heart that is sore and anxious with the vagaries of a mysteriously-offended lover, and Sybil had not even yet classed Don as a lover.

For, on the 1st of August, a card arrived, inviting Miss Whateley and Miss Sybil Harrington to the ball to be given on August 31st, in honour of the Earl of Billington's coming of age.

The invitations were issued by the Dowager Countess, and Miss Whateley and Sybil did little else that first morning than examine and discuss it, from the Billington arms at the top to the *R.S.V.P.* in the corner.

‘Just to think of inviting an old woman like me!’ Miss Whateley said, ‘it is quite ridiculous!’

And yet I think she was rather pleased, and got a little flushed in her old cheeks and bright in her eyes over the matter.

‘I don't see that it's ridiculous to ask you, Auntie,’ Sybil said. ‘Lady Billington goes to balls, and Betty says she wears low dresses, and diamonds on her neck and arms, and her hair done in puffs and rolls. I wonder how you would look in diamonds and puffed-out hair,’ said the girl, reflectively arranging the cap-strings under Miss Whateley's chin, not able, with the

wildest effort of imagination, to picture such an impossible setting for the placid, old face.

The answering of the invitation was a great difficulty to Miss Whateley, the manner of it, I mean, for both she and Sybil were of one mind about the matter, that the invitation must be declined as gratefully as they could contrive, for it was very kind to have asked them, and Miss Whateley, with a curious, little leaven of the old Adam which comes out in the best of us, but which I should not have suspected in such a sweet, old soul, felt that she would have liked Mrs Grant to see that card of invitation.

Sybil had not said anything to Miss Whateley about that wild talk of Lady Betty's about the ball, and the dresses that she meant to make Granny give to both of them. She had learnt not to build anything very solid on the numerous foundations that Lady Betty laid with such a quick and clever hand, especially when they involved other people's co-operation, and she felt that Lady Billington might have a word to say in this matter, and was by no means a person who could be managed, and made to do things in the light and airy way that Lady Betty described.

So it was not a great disappointment to Sybil declining the invitation. It had been great fun talking of the dancing and the pretty dress and all the rest of it, but so it was to talk of half-a-dozen other schemes of

Lady Betty's, which Sybil felt all the time were most unlikely to come to pass.

But the matter of declining was a serious difficulty. It is so hard to express gratitude in the third person, and 'Miss Whateley and Miss Sybil Harrington regret that they will be' (I am afraid they put 'will be') 'unable to accept Lady Billington's kind invitation,' sounded to Miss Whateley's ear so brutally curt and uncourteous that she tore up and burnt the sheet of notepaper directly it was written.

Ultimately, after a sinful waste of writing paper, the following note was sent:—

'Dear Lady Billington,—It was very kind of you to ask Sybil and me to the ball, but I am too old, and she is too young, so we must decline your kind invitation, though we are very grateful for your kindness. Sybil sends her love.'

Miss Whateley would have liked to remain 'yours respectfully,' but Sybil thought 'sincerely' was more suitable.

The word 'kind' occurred too many times, and Miss Whateley was by no means satisfied either with the composition or the writing, and there was a hardly-perceptible blot in one corner, but Maria was waiting to bring in tea, and Sybil to run and post the letter, so Miss Whateley put it into an envelope and let it go as it was, without further alteration,

or even the application of a penknife to the minute blot.

It can be easily imagined that those invitations excited much interest in many other houses besides Miss Whateley's, houses of varying degrees of importance throughout the county.

It might have been interesting to follow some of these missives, and note the different ways in which they were received, and the comments made on them, but the only one, besides Miss Whateley's, that concerns the course of this story, was the one that was delivered that morning at Shirley Grove, a pretty, little place some ten miles from Hayhurst, where a widow lady and her daughters had been living for some few years past.

It is thirteen years since we have met Mrs Harrington Jones, but, really, she is very little altered, except in having become more portly and substantial. Time has dealt very kindly with her as far as outward appearance goes, though it has made her a widow, but as it has left her very comfortably off, and the late Colonel had his faults, which his wife very keenly appreciated, we may reckon that time had dealt kindly with her all round.

Perhaps, if Mrs Harrington Jones had had the ordering of her circumstances, she might have wished to see one of her two daughters happily married, though, in

conversation she always counted it as one of her chief blessings that she had been permitted to keep both her dear girls with her. She could not imagine what she would have done without either of them. She did not wish to be selfish, but she did not think she could have spared either, and, indeed, when there seemed a prospect of dear Alice leaving the nest in company with such a delightful young man, so well connected and superior in every way, she fretted herself quite ill, though she never would have breathed a word of her aching mother's heart if her darling child's happiness had been involved.

The darling child herself had quite a different remembrance of the episode in question, but that does not concern the present narrative.

As Alice and Gertrude had been quite grown-up thirteen years before, it may be gathered, without prying too closely into the question of ladies' ages, which is a troublesome and useless curiosity, that the Miss Harrington Jones's were getting on in years, and people were inclined to smile when their mother spoke of them as 'the girls,' or treated them as simple, guileless creatures, who must be carefully guarded from anything that might corrupt their innocence.

They had left London on Colonel Harrington Jones's death, and settled at Shirley, a small property which the Colonel had bought as a suitable residence for his

family after his death. To be sure, it was in the same county as Colcroft, which still left an unpleasant taste in Mrs Harrington Jones's mouth when she recalled it; but Shirley was quite at the other side, and near a different country town and station and line of railway, and altogether in a different circle, and besides, when they came to settle there, it was nearly ten years since that little episode of the troublesome child, when Mrs Harrington Jones had conscientiously tried to do her duty to poor Tom Harrington's wretched, little girl.

You see by that time Tom Harrington had been placed among the number of those whom we patronisingly call 'poor,' the news of his death having, by some roundabout way, reached his relations, though it had never penetrated to Hayhurst. And besides, the catastrophe which had led to Tom Harrington's sudden flight, and the breaking-up of the great firm of Scott and Harrington, had not turned out so overwhelming and disgraceful as had been thought at first. A good sum in the pound had been paid the creditors, and another smash, with a much larger infusion of swindling, had occurred soon afterwards, and put this failure out of people's heads.

Indeed, as some of Tom Harrington's friends said, if he had just kept quiet and waited, and not made such a sensational departure, it might all have come right, and after a few years he might have taken his old place

in society, and been none the worse for it. Why, look at Brown, Jones, and Robinson ; they wanted a lot more whitewashing than poor Tom Harrington, and now they are highly respectable members of society, and no one has a word to say against them.

But, though Mrs Harrington Jones spoke (when she mentioned him) more leniently of 'poor' Tom Harrington, she made no further efforts to take his child off Miss Whateley's hands, though she had declared that the notion of any relation of her husband's (however distant) living on the charity of others was intolerably galling to her proud nature, and I think, as years passed on, she forgot all about her, so the galling process did not go very deep, or perhaps she maligned her nature in calling it proud.

Mrs Harrington Jones did not realise at first how general the invitations to this ball had been throughout the neighbourhood, and she searched her memory for occasions when she might have met and been introduced to Lady Billington, though, if such an event had ever happened, I do not think much searching of memory would have been required, or to recall friends in common who might have mentioned her name to the Countess as one of the agreeable neighbours to be found in Blankshire.

It took off some of the gratification, during the course of the next day, to find that little Mrs Wood, the

clergyman's wife, had also had an invitation, as she found that lady's baby, the youngest of seven, trying a little, white, front tooth, which had come through only the day before, bless him ! on a card similar to the one stuck in the mirror over the dining-room mantelpiece at Shirley, only with Mrs Wood's name on it instead of Mrs and the Misses Harrington Jones's, as far as could be made out from its beslobbered condition, and one corner being nibbled away.

'It seems likely to be rather an *omnium gatherum*, from what I gather,' she told her daughters after this, and, happily, she did not guess that her own name had been hesitated over when the lists were made out, though only the quite impossible people were excluded.

'The girls' were rather afraid that an *omnium gatherum* meant less money expended on the new ball-dresses which their mother had promised to give them in the first elation of receiving Lady Billington's invitation, but this did not turn out to be the case, and Mrs Harrington Jones seemed so generously inclined in the matter that her daughters even debated if it might not run to the length of pearl necklaces.

'It is a pity Alice is so stout !' Mrs Harrington Jones would commune with herself in those days, contemplating her daughters. It was only to herself, you may be sure, that she said it, for 'plump' was the very outside expression she had ever been heard to use

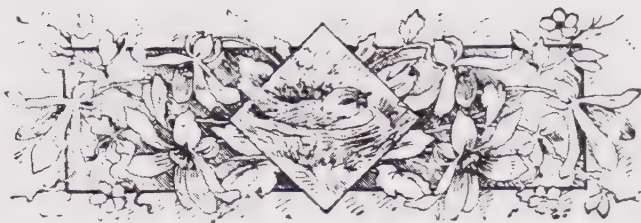
in describing her eldest daughter's proportions. 'But men, and especially young men, frequently admire well-rounded figures, and if he prefers something more slim,' (there apparently was some special 'he' in view in these calculations), 'there is Gertrude, who is almost too thin. I wish her elbows did not get so red! and I think just a little powder on the nose in the evening is quite allowable, though I don't like girls touching up their complexions.'

There was nothing, of course, said openly between mother and daughters as to the ultimate intention of those elegant ball-dresses. Mrs Harrington Jones was far too lady-like for such indecent sincerity, but the girls must have been much stupider than they were if they had not perfectly well understood that they were being given another chance of casting off the terrible disgrace of spinsterhood, and of achieving a match which would make their mother the happiest and proudest of women, and likewise they must have been much more conceited and sanguine than they were, if they had thought for a minute that there was the slightest probability of their doing what their mother intended.

Mrs Harrington Jones got quite annoyed at her daughters always calling the coming entertainment the 'coming of age' ball, thereby keeping the youth of the Earl constantly in view, and she went on somewhat

irrelevantly, as it appeared, to dwell on how many happy and prosperous marriages she had known, and that among the highest aristocracy, where the bride had had the advantage of the bridegroom in point of years.





CHAPTER XXVII.

CINDERELLA'S DRESS.

That your true lover may see
Your glory also, and render
All homage to his own darling
Queen Maud in all her splendour.

TENNYSON.



AS I have said, it was no very great disappointment to Sybil that she was not going to the ball, but she was a little disappointed at not receiving a word of remonstrance from Lady Betty, who had seemed so anxious about it when she was at Billington.

But, anyhow, there was a good deal of the festivities that she would come in for, and that Miss Whateley would be able to see too, the out-of-door *fête* in the Park, and the feasting the poor labourers on the estate, and the school children, and there would be fireworks and a band, and all that Lord Billington had described with partly-affected dread as a great infliction, but

which seemed to Sybil a delightful, little bit out of fairy-land.

Miss Whateley shook her head a little doubtfully when Sybil discoursed about her presence at these festivities. She was not very enterprising in those days. She was getting a lazy, old woman, she told Sybil, who indignantly reproved her for telling such wicked falsehoods.

Sybil was also very indignant, and this time really so, instead of in loving pretence, with Mrs Cullen, whom she met one day in the village, and who told her that she thought Miss Whateley had been breaking a good deal of late, as if, Sybil said angrily, scanning the dear, old face and figure with eyes dim with tears, she would not have been the first to see if there were anything amiss, and she assumed such a dictatorial manner in the matter of helpings at dinner, and amount of bread and butter at tea, that Miss Whateley got quite nervous, and resorted to base subterfuges of passing little bits surreptitiously to Shaver, who was one of those thin, grey cats who are capable of absorbing any amount of food without showing any corresponding improvement in appearance, or to Prince, who betrayed her by his demonstrative gratitude and desire for further favours.

Sybil also insisted on a cup of tea being brought up to Miss Whateley in the morning before getting up,

which was a heavy trial to the old lady, as it spoiled her enjoyment of her cup of tea at breakfast, and as the Maria of the period, as is all too common with Marias of all periods, was a bad getter-up in the morning, the tea was most days a very poor affair, either smoky from the sticks of the newly-lighted fire, or made with water that was not boiling, and Miss Whateley felt obliged to swallow the nauseous draught without remonstrance, as it was so good of the child to think of it, and gave Maria so much extra trouble.

So, too, Sybil quite resented Miss Whateley's doubt about going to the Billington fête, and even cried once about it, so that Miss Whateley had to begin to talk quite frivolously of what she could wear on the occasion, and Sybil was only comforted by being allowed to pick Miss Whateley's bonnet to pieces, and entirely remodel it, till it looked quite like new, and would not have disgraced a duchess, Sybil declared, in honest pride at her handiwork.

There was also a new dress for Sybil herself to be made, though she declared it was sinful extravagance, and that her Sunday frock would have done nicely with a little alteration. But Miss Whateley had a little sum in the post office savings bank, that she had put in many years ago, before the child came to her, for a particular purpose, and which, in the course of years, had gathered a little interest on the tiny capital, so

Miss Whateley drew out enough to get Sybil a white cambric, and the girl never dreamt the object of the little fund, though Miss Whateley, as she reckoned the amount yet remaining, said to herself, 'Funerals are so much cheaper now than they used to be.'

Sybil's dress was so great an interest to them both, that it diverted, at any rate, Miss Whateley's mind from dwelling as much as it otherwise would on Don's mysterious behaviour, for, after that unfortunate meeting with Lady Betty on Sunday afternoon, he never came near the place, though Miss Whateley said he might have known the Billingtons were away, if it was on their account he did not come.

'I can't help thinking he may be ill, Sybil. I noticed that Sunday he kept clearing his throat as though he had a cold. I wish you would go up some afternoon and see. He is so careless about getting his feet wet.'

But Sybil declared she was much too busy, and that Don would come when he felt inclined, and she was sure they did not want him fidgeting about.

Which Miss Whateley felt was not a very kind way of speaking of her poor Don, and not like Sybil to speak so. But she found out, from old Reynolds, the rheumatic man, that Don had been along that way several times of late.

'He allers stops to pass the time aday, and asks

after my old legs, he do, and he looks fine and well, he do, and no mistake. Miss Sybil were a-asking after him more'n once alate, how he were alookin', and if he'd got a cold. I'd athought she'd a told ye what I tells her about um.'

And Miss Whateley wondered why Sybil had not mentioned it, and was very glad Don was not ill, and sorry he was so hard-worked as not to have time to come in and see them, 'he always enjoys it so, poor boy!'

That white cambric dress was turned out in Sybil's best style, after a fashion partly gathered from one of Lady Betty's dresses and partly from attentive study of the shop windows at Kingham, and of a fashion plate she had got a peep at in the stationer's shop there. There was no doubt it was a great success, and she was holding it up for Miss Whateley's inspection, when a wonderful event occurred. The railway delivery van from Kingham station drew up at the gate, and the man brought in a large dress box directed to Miss Whateley.

There must be some mistake about it, Miss Whateley and Sybil both agreed, but the direction was plain and distinct, and the carriage paid, so the man declined to discuss whom it could possibly be meant for, and set it down and went off.

And then Sybil suggested that they might find

some explanation inside, and proceeded to undo the string.

And what do you think that box contained? I find that I cannot help telling of that wonderful box as I should a tale to the children, for there was something so childish in the surprise and delight and rapture of Miss Whateley and Sybil over the contents of the box, and of Maria too, peeping, unreprieved, over their shoulders, that suggests the wave of the fairy godmother's wand that changed Cinderella's rags into splendid attire, and I don't think either of them would have been much more surprised if the pumpkin coach, and the spanking, four-in-hand rats, had likewise appeared before Miss Whateley's little gate.

For in that box was the loveliest ball-dress girl's heart could conceive, all creamy-white silk, and tulle, and lace. I hardly feel competent to describe it, so I will take advantage of the ruse I employ when the glories of Cinderella's apparel gets beyond my capacity, and I say to the children, 'Now each imagine the loveliest dress you ever saw or thought of. Cinderella's dress was like that.'

There were also long gloves, and dainty shoes and stockings, and all the small accessories necessary for an evening toilette, and on the top lay a note in Lady Billington's scrawly, old writing.

'Dear old friend,—Will you let Sybil come to my

boy's ball, and accept this frock for her, and oblige a very tired, old woman.—Elizabeth Billington.'

It really quite upset Miss Whateley, the beauty of it, for anything very pretty was always apt to dim her foolish, old eyes; and then the thought of how Sybil would look in it, for it was always a sore point with her that she could not dress her darling as she ought; and then the kindness of the way it was done, putting it really as if the obligation were being conferred by Miss Whateley.

She got quite hysterical over it, laughing and crying till Sybil was obliged to carry the box off severely, and put it away on the top of the old chest on the landing, quite out of reach of Miss Whateley, who, however, kept trotting up and down stairs all the evening, on one excuse or another, but really to make sure that no mischance had happened to that box.

'For Maria is so careless with her candle, you know, Sybby, and sparks fly about so easily.'

And she awoke in the night in a perfect fever, from an agonising dream that Shaver, who, being a tom cat, might have been held above suspicion even in dreams, had had a large family of kittens in the very middle of that box and all its glories.

The next morning brought a jubilant letter from Lady Betty, saying that Lady Billington had needed no persuasion from her about the dress, but that she had

herself proposed it when she got Miss Whateley's letter declining the invitation, and she would have gone further, and presented Miss Whateley with a dress, only it was impossible to imagine the dear, old lady in any other dress than her own, except it might be an angel's.

'I told Granny that you must be at the ball if I was, and Billington said the same.'

Sybil stopped here, and her eyes had a little, dreamy look in them, as they followed the flight of a swallow skimming through the air outside the window. And no wonder! you will say, after this flattering anxiety on Lord Billington's part that she should be at the ball. But, as a matter of fact, she was wondering what Don would say to that lovely dress, and if there would be the slightest chance of his seeing her in it.

'You must try it on directly,' Lady Betty's letter went on, 'if you have not done so already, to see if it fits. That was why I carried off that bodice of yours, and fidgeted about how much longer your skirt was than mine. I was afraid you would guess what I was driving at. If there is anything wrong in the fit, I expect you will be able to set it right, as you are so awfully clever at dressmaking, but if not, Parker will do it when we come down. You will have to dress up at the Park, and Parker will dress your hair, though she won't do it half as sweetly as you do it yourself.'

And so on for a page or two more, full of gay, girlish chatter, Betty being altogether in a lighter vein at present, and more taken up with dancing and dress than with philanthropic schemes for drainage and sanitary improvement.

That evening Don happened to pass through Hayhurst. It was curious how often his way happened to take him through the quiet, little, village street, and past the white gate of Miss Whateley's garden, and, especially of late, after dark, when anyone might linger for a bit outside a house without being observed, and might see shadows passing across the blind, and even, in summer time, when the window was open, hear the sound of voices, just the sound without the sense, so that there was no suspicion of eavesdropping.

But that evening Don noticed that the sitting-room window was more brightly lighted up than usual, and the blind not drawn down, and that there was much passing and repassing of an unusual character, which might perhaps betoken illness. He remembered that Miss Whateley had not been looking quite herself lately, and had even been kept from church that unlucky Sunday afternoon, when he had paid such an ill-timed visit.

So he turned in at the gate, and took a look in at the window to make sure, as he grimly told himself, that there were no earls and lords and ladies lurking about.

And then he stood still, as if turned to stone by the picture that met his eye, framed in by Miss Whateley's window, wreathed round with clematis trails and rose branches.

There had been a grand trying-on, and Sybil stood in the middle of the room in her ball-dress, with all the available light of the house (it was not very much) falling on her, from lamps and candles perched in all sorts of odd situations adjudged by Miss Whateley to be safe.

Miss Whateley was in her armchair in the corner, quite speechless, and trying vainly to keep her spectacles from getting dim, for she had promised Sybil solemnly not to be so ridiculous as she had been the evening before.

The only sounds that broke the stillness, for the minute or two that Don stood there, were the snoring breathing of Maria, who stood by the door in open-mouthed admiration, and the whines of Prince from the kitchen, where he had been confined to prevent boisterous demonstrations.

Don had never seen anyone in evening dress, it must be remembered, and even to an experienced eye, accustomed to elegant toilettes, Sybil might have appeared wondrous fair as she stood there, looking a little shyly at the reflection she could see in the small mirror over the mantel-piece, of the long, round arms

bare to the shoulder, and the warm whiteness of her young neck.

For a minute that living picture was still and motionless before Don's aching, dazzled gaze, the next, the spell was broken. Miss Whateley gave a little choking sob, Maria's mouth shut with a snap, Sybil bent to examine the set of a plait or the fit of a seam, and Prince burst out into excited barking, aware of the presence of Bounce outside, and Don strode away with a worse tumult in his heart even than that first night after his birthday, or that bad night after he had seen Lord Billington with Sybil, when the torturing flame of jealousy had first been added to his other sufferings.

'Oh! it's no wonder! no wonder!' he kept telling himself that night in his restless wanderings through the woods, 'no wonder that that little puppy of an earl should have found her out. She was made to be a countess, and never, never, never to be the wife of a boor!'



CHAPTER XXVIII.

LADY BILLINGTON SEES.

These wild wood-flowers I've pu'd to deck
That spotless breast o' thine,
The courtier's gems may witness love
But 'tis na love like mine.

BURNS.

I AM an old fool!' Lady Billington told herself before she had been twenty-four hours at the Hall.

The home-coming of the Earl had gone off most successfully the day before. There had been a grand reception by the enthusiastic tenantry. A huge evergreen arch had bidden him welcome home in large letters; all along the road from the station groups of people had cheered and waved handkerchiefs; and at the beginning of the Billington estate the horses had been taken out, and the carriage pulled by stalwart labourers the rest of the way; bells had pealed; flags had floated; and at night bonfires blazed in his honour.

And Billington had acquitted himself very creditably, his grandmother was bound to confess, instead of treating it all as something between a joke and a bore as he had seemed likely to do.

He had stood up in the carriage when they were taking out the horses, and said a few well-chosen words without any of that humming and hawing which makes most men's first attempts at speaking, and many men's subsequent ones too, so painful to their womenkind, or any who feel responsible for them.

And again at the Hall, to the assembled servants and tenants, he spoke cordially and easily, and yet with a certain dignity that his grandmother quite appreciated.

He had also made a capital host in the evening at the large dinner-party that was the first of the series of entertainments. He talked to the right people, and made himself generally agreeable, and Lady Billington was altogether satisfied with him, and inclined to think he was going to be a credit to the Billington family, though he was so different from his predecessors.

There was a large house-party of visitors, and more arriving the next day, and Billington made all the arrangements for their amusement and reception as if he had been used to entertaining all his life, developing quite a natural genius for it, his grandmother thought, with much complacency.

‘Now, if he can find a nice wife, with plenty of money, he will do very well. There will be a dead-set at him, of course, but I fancy he’s wary. He managed Lady Croker very diplomatically when she tried to pair him off with that rocking-horse daughter of hers for a ride this afternoon. I fancy my young man has his wits about him, and a good thing too!’

Most of the house-party were out that afternoon, riding or driving, and some of the younger people were at tennis, and Lady Billington was awaiting the arrival of some of the guests who were expected that afternoon.

Lord Billington had been closeted in the library all the morning with his lawyer, and had returned there again after lunch, so just for a short time Lady Billington was alone, and was glad to lean back a bit in the corner of her sofa and rest, and her reflections, as we have seen, were pleasant as regards her grandson, and the manner in which he was acquitting himself.

She was dozing a little, I think, for she was startled when Betty’s voice said, ‘Granny, here is Sybil,’ and the two girls came in through the window leading out on to the terrace through the conservatory, followed by Lord Billington, whom she had imagined to be still poring over leases and deeds in the library.

Lady Billington’s first thought was ‘What a lovely girl!’ and the next was the sentiment with which this chapter began, ‘I am an old fool!’

‘I told Sybil,’ Betty went on, ‘that she must come up this afternoon and tell you how she liked her dress for the ball, and Bill and I have been across the Park to meet her.’

‘Humph!’ was Lady Billington’s inward ejaculation, a very significant humph, while outwardly she received Sybil as kindly and cordially as ever, and made her come and sit close to her, and tell her of the dress, and how Miss Whateley was, watching the sweet, girlish face all the while with her keen, old, black eyes, which every now and then turned to take a look at her grandson, who, perhaps having had more experience of those penetrating glances, did not meet them as simply and fearlessly as Sybil did, but let his eye-glass drop out with a click each time she looked at him, and grew a little fidgety under her gaze. . . .

She was saying to herself, just the same as Don had said a fortnight before so often in the woods, ‘It’s no wonder! no wonder at all! Anyone with eyes in his head would have done the same. Only it is quite out of the question, and won’t do at all for a Billington. Why, her father was a swindler, and she hasn’t a half-penny. What an old fool I was not to remember how sweetly pretty she was as a child, and I encouraged Billington to run down here to see Betty, when I knew the girls were always together. And I’ve made a point of her coming to the ball, and have given her a dress

which will make her look prettier than ever. And I wouldn't have any harm happen to the child for that dear, old Miss Whateley's sake, as well as her own. Not that Billington's one of that sort, thank goodness! but he may make the poor, little thing unhappy, for there's not one girl in a hundred that would not be a bit dazzled, and she's too much of a child to see how impossible it is. I wonder what I'd better do to put a stop to it once for all, for there's a spice of his father's obstinate temper in the boy, and he's capable of doing anything foolish if he's thwarted. I'll go down the first opportunity and have a talk with Miss Whateley.'

Just as she reached this determination, having carried on all the time a very kindly, pleasant, little chat with Sybil, a visitor was announced, not, as she expected, those arriving from the station, but a morning caller, and she rose to receive Mrs Harrington Jones with a slight feeling of annoyance.

Most of the county had resolved to delay their calls till after the ball, but Mrs Harrington Jones had discovered some little pretext for calling earlier, feeling that, in this way, she might be forestalling her neighbours, and giving her daughters a good start.

I think the pretext was some slight acquaintance with one of the ladies staying in the house, and finding that Lady Croker was not at home, she thought she really must come in and see if Lady Billington had

been much fatigued with the journey yesterday, and the enthusiastic reception that she heard had been given to the Earl and herself.

There was a slight stiffening of Lady Billington's erect figure, and a little hardening in the keen, dark eyes and the tone of voice, which made Sybil remember how she had heard people say that Lady Billington was very haughty.

Sybil had drawn back into the window when Mrs Harrington Jones entered. She had not heard the name, and, if she had, she might not have recalled the little episode of her baby days.

After Lord Billington's introduction to Mrs Harrington Jones, and a few polite remarks, he joined Sybil in the window, and both Lady Billington and Mrs Harrington Jones's eyes followed him, and both of them saw the pretty picture Sybil made, standing leaning against the window, with a background of the ferns and palms of the conservatory to her slight, graceful figure, and her sweet, bright face turned to Lord Billington, who was bending towards her with a very unmistakable look of interest and admiration.

'A pretty girl enough!' Mrs Harrington Jones took stock of her disparagingly, 'but how shockingly dressed. Why, those sailor hats are only 10½d. anywhere, and such a shabby, washed-out frock that I should not like my housemaid to be seen in. She must be some one of

high rank to venture to dress so shabbily, and there is a sort of air about her that shows she is somebody. Her face is familiar to me, too. Where can I have seen her?' and Mrs Harrington Jones went searching through her memory for any scions of nobility whom she might have met with such a sweet, radiant face.

But it was plain enough how the land lay as regards the Earl, and she might have saved the expense of those dresses, as far as any prospects for Alice and Gertrude were concerned. No doubt it was an arranged matter in the family, and perhaps the Earl's marriage would follow immediately on his coming of age. Well, there was no accounting for tastes. Some men really preferred dowdy girls, and if Sybil were to be classed as a dowdy girl, there was very little doubt that Lord Billington was one of those men with such an extraordinary want of taste.

It was rather up-hill work talking to Lady Billington, Mrs Harrington Jones found, though in society the Dowager was reckoned a good talker, but in spite of the art she had learnt to perfection in her many years of study in the school of society—that of talking easily on one subject while she was thinking of another—the old lady could not keep her attention to Mrs Harrington Jones's platitudes, while her mind was painfully occupied with those two in the window, though she would

on no account have allowed her visitor to imagine that she was the least disquieted.

She assented smilingly when Lord Billington said that Miss Harrington had promised to show him the pictures, and explain who they represented.

‘I expect she knows much more about the pictures than you or Betty,’ she said.

‘What a charming girl!’ Mrs Harrington Jones said, looking after Sybil through her double eye-glasses. ‘I did not quite catch the name. Lady——?’

‘Oh, that’s Sybil Harrington,’ Lady Billington said a little dryly. ‘Miss Harrington——Oh, by the way, she may be some connection of yours. The name is the same.’

‘Sybil Harrington,’ Mrs Harrington Jones repeated reflectively. It is hard upon anyone to have to take up a line of conduct without a moment’s consideration, and to have suddenly to get a despised, poor relation, whom you have hitherto regarded, when you regarded her at all, as a disgrace and humiliation, into perspective as a countess, and the principal lady in the county.

And then she had to consider, in the twinkling of an eye, if that episode of thirteen years ago had better be remembered or ignored, if the embryo countess would cherish ill-feelings towards her in consequence, and if it would not be better to let bygones be bygones, and meet as strangers in these altered circumstances.

Perhaps, if she had had more time to consider, Mrs Harrington Jones might have decided it so.

‘She lives with an old friend of mine, Miss Whateley, at Hayhurst,’ Lady Billington went on, and Mrs Harrington Jones determined to claim relationship.

‘Miss Whateley? Then I do believe it must be a young cousin of mine. Dear! dear! how very interesting! And dear, old Miss Whateley is still alive? Really! quite a character, is she not? I really must renew our acquaintance. We have not met for years.’

If anything could have impressed on Lady Billington’s mind more firmly the utter impossibility of the Earl marrying Sybil it would have been the relationship to this odious woman.

She made the odious woman feel that her call had been more than sufficiently prolonged, and cut short all the graceful, valedictory remarks that Mrs Harrington Jones was accustomed to make after she had risen to take her leave, by ringing the bell for her to be shown out before she was half under way.

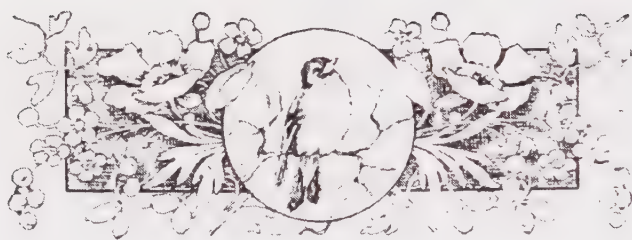
But Mrs Harrington Jones was compensated for her somewhat summary dismissal by meeting Sybil herself and the Earl in the hall as she was being ushered out, and Sybil found herself, to her consternation, enveloped in a voluminous embrace, while Mrs Harrington Jones impressed upon her how delighted and surprised she was to find, from Lady Billington, that it was her dear,

little Sybil, that she had no idea she was still at Hayhurst, or she would have come over long ago to find her, and renew her acquaintance with dear, old Miss Whateley.

‘ You will give my love to her, won’t you, my dear, and say I hope she has not forgotten me ? ’

Lord Billington, with an inward ejaculation, let his eye-glass fall out with a click.





CHAPTER XXIX.

THE BIRTHDAY FÊTE.

A little warmth, a little light
Of love's bestowing, and so, good-night,
A little fun to match the sorrow
Of each day's growing, and so, good-morrow.

DEMAURIER.



LADY BILLINGTON had firmly made up her mind that, at all costs, she must see Miss Whateley, and put it before her how utterly impossible a marriage between Sybil and the Earl must be. But she found that she could not manage to get over to Hayhurst even for the few minutes it would take to explain matters, during the week preceding Lord Billington's birthday, so entirely was her time taken up by receiving and entertaining people, and by all the various festivities taking place every day.

As, however, Sybil did not appear again upon the scene, and as the Earl was taken up with business with

his lawyers and agents, and with entertaining his guests in an irreproachable manner, Lady Billington's fears were somewhat allayed, and she began to hope that she had taken alarm too soon, and no harm had been done.

It could not be helped about the ball. No doubt the girl would look distractingly pretty, but other men would find that out, and Billington would have so many obligations, as host and hero of the occasion, that he would not have much chance of getting into mischief, and after the ball it would be easy enough to take decided steps, if necessary.

It would have been a very awkward business, Lady Billington felt, with most people. Now, with such a woman as that Mrs Harrington Jones, it would have been detestable, and yet with a designing, intriguing woman like that, there would have been some excitement in measuring swords, and in putting her to rout if she had been trying to inveigle the young Earl into some unsuitable engagement.

But there was nothing of the sort here. The idea of Miss Whateley intriguing, or trying to inveigle anyone, was a laughable absurdity, and the girl was good and sweet and simple and lovely enough, in all conscience, for any man to make a fool of himself for, and if life were only simpler and more natural, there need have been no cause or impediment why these two should not

have married and lived happy ever after. But it is no use pretending that we are living in Arcadia, and Billington's wife must have something more than her face for her fortune.

But, really, by the time the 30th arrived, Lady Billington's anxiety on the score of Sybil was quite put out of her head by the open and undisguised siege laid to the Earl by various matrons and maids. Lady Billington was surprised and disgusted, though, in her long experience of society, she must have seen a good deal of that style of thing, but she declared that, in her day, if people manœuvred and intrigued, they did it in a more delicate and refined manner, and did not make it patent to all beholders. There was Lady Croker in the house always flattering him, and following him up with that great, stupid daughter in tow, and there were those Miss Nugents, *fin de siècle* girls, who used slang and chaffed and called young men by their Christian names and smoked cigarettes, and were quite capable, Lady Billington believed, of riding bicycles and wearing divided skirts. And there were half-a-dozen more mothers and daughters vying with one another for the Earl's favour, without the smallest idea, apparently, of dignity or self-respect. If Billington had not had a good spice of common-sense, his head might well have been turned, but he divided his favours very impartially, and Lady Billington never felt the same

uncomfortable conviction about any of them that had flashed on her mind when she saw him with Sybil Harrington.

But, as we have said, the uneasiness on that score was put out of her head by stress of circumstances, and only returned again with renewed force on the 30th, when she once more saw them together.

It was that most unusual thing, in this uncertain and contrary English climate, a beautiful day on which an out-of-door fête has been arranged, for there are many beautiful days in English summers when there is nothing dependent on the weather.

But to-day it was bright and sunny and clear from morning to night, with that fresh, exhilarating feeling in the air that might be, though we don't like to think it so soon, a touch of frost.

The trees just here and there were showing a tinge of autumnal colouring on the rich, heavy, dark green, and the bracken under the great oak trees in the Park was touched with yellow, and the distance was very, very blue between the trees. The old house looked fine and solid and impressive against the background of great elms, on which the rooks were in great commotion, no doubt disturbed by the unwonted stir and bustle below.

From the flag-staff on the house floated a big crimson banner with the Billington arms, and down below on the terrace and in the gardens, the gay dresses of

ladies, and groups of people were coming and going, and beyond, in the Park, were the big marquees, where all the labourers on the estate had been feasted with mighty joints of beef and huge plum-puddings, and had drunk the young Earl's health in tankards of ale.

Tea was to follow for all the women and children, and, meanwhile, there were games going on,—cricket; great circles of kiss-in-the-ring, discreetly withdrawn from too near proximity to the terrace and the gentle-folks; races of all kinds, hurdle, in sacks, three-legged, wheelbarrow, carrying eggs in spoons; dancing to the strains of a lustily-braying brass band; while down on the lake, where Lord Billington had rocked so lazily in his punt among the lily leaves, boats packed full of people, with rather awe-stricken faces, impressed with the danger of thus braving the perils of the deep, and their own desperate courage in attempting it, wobbled slowly across from shore to shore.

Lord Billington had won golden opinions. He had made a hearty, manly, little speech when his health was proposed; he had carved a sirloin of beef with his own hands; had set going races; had started the dancing with one of the rosy-cheeked farmer's daughters in a high polka; had taken his shy at the cocoa-nuts, not nearly so successfully as some of the carter boys, who would remember to their dying day that they 'beat the

Earl at shyin' out an out;' had lighted his pipe from an old labourer's, and sat on a sunny bench with half-a-dozen of the oldest cottagers, smoking, and listening to their rambling reminiscences of father and grandfather; he had gossiped with the old women; poked slobbering babies in the cheek; patted children on the head; rowed one of the heavily-laden boats across the lake himself, and pushed a chair with an old, crippled man in it right up to the terrace, that he might get a better view of the cricket.

Lady Billington was not sure that he was not going a little bit too far in making himself agreeable, but in these democratic days she supposed it was necessary even for hereditary legislators to curry favour with their masters, especially as the stability of the House of Lords itself seemed to be threatened.

'Upon my word, Billington,' she whispered, as he passed her, rather heated from his exertions in the boat, and having just picked up a squalling child who had capsized over one of the tent ropes, and restored it to a beaming mother, 'Upon my word, Billington, electioneering is nothing to this!'

And he answered, 'No, by Jove!'

And then she saw his hot, little face light up quite radiantly into comparative good looks, and turning with an irritable feeling of presentiment saw, as she

expected, Sybil Harrington coming towards them with Miss Whateley.

They were late in arriving. Indeed, when it came to the point, Sybil was very doubtful about coming at all, for even she could see, with those eyes blinded by love, how very frail the old lady looked, and how even the little, unusual fuss of putting on her Sunday dress, and the bonnet fit for a duchess, brought a tired flush to the old cheeks and a worried look in the gentle, old eyes.

But Miss Whateley would not be persuaded to stop at home. It was not only that she knew that Sybil would be so greatly disappointed if she had to go by herself; it was not only because there would be so many old friends of hers there, rheumy old eyes that would look for her, shaking old hands that would stretch to meet hers, grumbling old tongues that would welcome her, tottering old legs that would come to meet her.

‘You’re safe to be there, Miss Whateley, mum, now aint ye? ’Twill be a terrible grand day, and no mistake.’

‘Oh yes, Martin, or Mrs Jones, or Elizabeth Ann,’ or half-a-dozen more, as the case might be. ‘I shall be there, and I shall look out for you.’

It was not only that she would be sorry to disappoint any one of these, and she was too good and

true herself to think it was only their humbug, and they would not really care or miss her if she was not there, as most of us distrust other people's sincerity.

She really wished to go herself. She was not too other-worldly but what she liked to see pretty things and happy faces, and to hear a band play, though she was not quite sure it was right at her age.

There is a lovely story I have read somewhere of an old monk, who had lived a holy and pure and spotless life within his monastery walls, and yet had been sent back from the gates of Paradise because he had yet to learn the beauty of God's earth. I do not think that Miss Whateley would have needed to be sent back on that account, or that it is necessary to enhance the beauty of the next world by disparaging this, which, fallen though it may be, is still God's creation, and full of His glory.

Sybil was going to drive Miss Whateley over to Billington in Betty's little cart with the fat pony, which was a nervous business for the old lady, who regarded horses as possessed of all sorts of deadly and dangerous tendencies, unless driven by one of the male sex, the smallest boy giving her a feeling of confidence unknown if the reins were held by the most experienced lady whip.

‘Sybil, my dear, why does he hold his head on one side? Is he going to shy?’

‘Sybby, I don’t like the way he wags his tail. Does it mean that he is going to run away?’

‘I think, if you don’t mind, my dear, I will walk past that gate. There is a donkey inside, and he might not like it.’

‘Sybby, I know I’m very foolish, but would you mind leading the pony down this hill? He seems inclined to trip.’

Sybil was very tender with her nervous fears, so the journey to Billington took a considerable time, and the Earl had got through a good many of his amiable exertions before they came.

The irritation in Lady Billington’s mind, aroused by the look in her grandson’s face, was allayed by the sight of Miss Whateley. The two old ladies had not met for six years, and six years means a good deal over eighty or under twenty.

Lady Billington, Sybil declared, looked younger than when she had seen her last, but Miss Whateley certainly looked very old and fragile, as if the corruptible clothing had worn very thin as the time drew near for putting it off altogether, and, looking at her, one could almost fancy that the disembodied spirit would not look so very different to the gentle, transparent form in which it had tabernacled.

Lady Billington found a nice, sheltered seat for her, commanding a good view of the proceedings, and drove away the hovering flunkeys with ices and claret cup, and sent Betty herself to fetch a really good, sensible cup of tea, which Miss Whateley greatly appreciated, though she had never fallen a victim to afternoon tea, but regarded tea as a regular meal, to which you sat up squarely to the table, and said your grace as at other meals.

‘Who is it that Lady Billington is making such a fuss over?’ one of the ladies staying in the house asked, I think it was Lady Croker.

‘I’m sure I don’t know. A funny, antediluvian-looking, old thing, but I expect she is somebody. I wonder if it can be old Lady Canterbury?’

When Miss Whateley’s nervousness had a little subsided, she was unfeignedly pleased and amused with the scene before her, finding out familiar faces in the crowd below, nodding to one and smiling to another, not always to the right person, but that did not matter, tapping her hand in time to the somewhat raucous strains of the band, and when they played a selection of popular, music-hall songs, declaring she knew them quite well.

‘What is it, Sybil? It is quite familiar to me. Tum ti tum. Tum ti tum,’ humming a tune that some poor, painted, brazen creature sang behind the

foot-lights, with all sorts of double meaning and vile suggestion.

She could have sat there all day, she declared, and watched the gay scene, and yet she was tempted to go and look at the gardens. She had not seen the Billington gardens for such a long time, and the glories of the bedding-out plants in rich masses on the velvet lawn, or the minute mosaic of the carpet gardening were very alluring.

But, after all, it was the people that attracted her most, and soon she was down among them all, quite surrounded by old friends clamouring for recognition.

‘Ay, maybe you don’t mind me, Miss Whateley, mum, but I minds you these fifty year and more.’

‘There, you’ll not forget our Johnnie as died fifteen year ago come Michaelmas? He thought a deal of you, he did!’

‘Why, who’d a thought of seeing you, mum?’

‘’Tis a sight for sore eyes, surely!’

And so on, and so on.

They all seemed so pleased to see her, so bright and happy, there was no grumbling, or ill-nature, or back-biting. The sky was blue overhead, and the sun shone, and the band played those merry, cheerful tunes, and the children laughed and shouted, and Miss Whateley’s eyes grew quite dim.

‘My dear,’ she said to Sybil, laying a tremulous, old hand on her arm, ‘it is all so beautiful! It is so nice to see them all so happy. I think it will be something like this in heaven.’

‘Of all tiresome things,’ Lady Croker was saying at that very moment, ‘this entertaining of the lower orders is the worst. How strong poor people do smell! and what a shocking noise that band makes!’

Things strike people so differently.

‘You are getting tired,’ Sybil said presently, ‘and I’m going to take you home.’

And Miss Whateley was obliged reluctantly to confess that she was a little tired.

‘I’ll go and find the pony, and we’ll go off quietly. Lady Billington won’t mind. She told me I must not let you get overdone.’

So Sybil planted Miss Whateley on a seat, surrounded by her court paying her homage, only her courtiers were the poor, the maimed, the halt, and the blind, and went off towards the stables. And there, in the lane, shadowed by elms that led there, as ill-luck would have it, though perhaps some people would not have designated the luck as ill, and perhaps it was not mere luck at all, Lord Billington was going in the same direction, being obliged also to go to the stables for some purpose, which was certainly a coincidence just at that time.

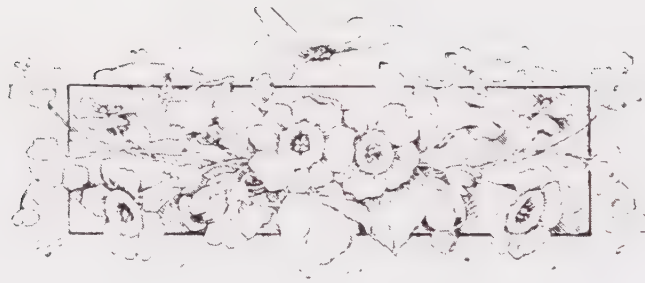
But it surely was ill-luck, nothing but luck on this occasion, and undoubtedly ill, so that it could hardly have been worse, that Don, of all people, should have seen those two, walking so pleasantly along that shady, secluded lane. Sybil so sweetly fair in that white dress she had made for herself, and a little, white, sailor hat. Mrs Harrington Jones was not there to appraise it to a farthing's worth, but no confection of a French milliner could have been more becoming. And Lord Billington, the hero of the day, in whose honour all these festivities were going on, and who surely should have been among his guests, was walking by her side, looking as satisfied as if there were nothing in the world so pleasant as being with Sybil Harrington, a sentiment in which Don heartily agreed, though he would have liked to strangle the little Earl for venturing to think so.

Don had been persuaded, sorely against his inclination, to come over to Billington to the fête. I do not think he would have agreed to go if it had not been that old Reynolds, the rheumatic man, wanted some one to lend a hand with his grand-daughter to get his chair up the bit of hill before you get to the Park gates. To gratify him, Don had come inside the Park, and, steering clear of the crowd, had crossed the grass towards the stables just in time to see Sybil and the Earl pass along, not noticing him as he stood

on the bank among the bushes, looking down at them.

‘Yes, dear, I’m a little bit tired,’ Miss Whateley said, ‘but I enjoyed it very much, and I’m very glad I went. It was really quite beautiful.’





CHAPTER XXX.

THE NIGHT OF THE BALL.

All night have the roses heard
The flute, violin, bassoon,
All night has the casement jessamine stirr'd
To the dancers dancing in tune.

TENNYSON.



THE night of the Billington ball. From all parts of the county, carriage lamps might be seen coming along the dark roads, all converging to one point, and the treading of horses' feet, and the roll of wheels, disturbed the country people from their first slumbers, for it's early to bed with the labourers, and by eight o'clock there are not many stirring.

Outside the Billington gates, however, a group of people had gathered to watch the carriages turn in, though they only got a glimpse of faces and light wraps and black coats and shining shirt fronts.

Some few penetrated farther, to where the Hall

came in sight, with its brightly-lighted windows and the temporary ball-room at the side from whence the strains of the string band reached them in such wonderful, seductive dance music as rustic ears had never dreamed of.

But one tall man, who had taken up his post near the gate at quite an early hour in the evening, did not follow the more adventurous spirits into the Park, but kept his place doggedly, exchanging no word with those around him, but scanning the occupants of every carriage that drove in with an interest that never seemed to flag.

Some of those standing near him recognised him, and one or two ventured a remark, but got no answer, only a surly monosyllable.

‘There’ll be more coming in at t’other gate, Master Don,’ one of them suggested. ‘I’ve more’n half a mind to go yonder. All the folks from Broughton and Kipperton way, a sight of gentlefolks.’

But Don kept his place till he was nearly the only one left standing there, and the carriages that had come in rapid succession at first, came at longer and longer intervals.

It was only then that a thought seemed to strike him, and he gave a little ejaculation of annoyance, and turned away, trudging gloomily down the hill in the darkness and the soft, fine rain that had begun to fall.

‘What a fool I was!’ he was saying to himself, ‘not to think of that before. Of course she went up to the Park this afternoon and dressed there. Why didn’t I think of that before, instead of standing like a stuck pig gaping into those carriages for a couple of hours?’

Dressed? Yes, she had put on that dress he had seen her in, all white and shining and lovely, and the blazing lights of the ball-room had fallen on her, on her sweet face and dainty neck, and those slender, young arms; and eyes had looked her over, men’s eyes, evil eyes whose very glance must sully her spotless purity. He ground his teeth, and struck savagely at the hedges with his stick in impotent anger at the torturing thought.

She was dancing now, whirling round in the arms of one of those puppies, whose very touch was profanation.

‘Dance with me, Don,’ she used to say, years ago, and she would laugh again and again at his awkward, shuffling attempts to gratify her.

‘Do like me, Don,’ she would say, and point a tiny toe, and hold out her skirt in mimic grace.

He took off his hat to let the rain beat on his hot head, which seemed fit to burst with its fevered imaginings.

She would dance with the Earl, and he would look at her as he did in the lane the day before. He had no idea of duty dances, and of how much was expected of

the young Earl before he could follow his own inclinations, even to the extent of one waltz, and Don pictured him always at her side, and the thought stung him to a perfect frenzy.

He had not meant to go through Hayhurst, but to take the shorter way across the fields, but he found himself involuntarily entering the quiet village street, where all was still, and hardly a light to be seen in any of the cottage windows.

At Miss Whateley's, a light was burning in the bedroom window where the old lady was alone. The clock in the church tower struck eleven as he stood at the gate, an hour at which, as a rule, all the lights were out, for he had more than once paid a nightly visit.

'I daresay,' he told himself, 'the old lady is nervous and can't sleep. It is too bad to leave her alone like that. She was looking very poorly when I saw her last.'

He turned into the garden, and stood for a minute in the porch, with the pang that never failed to come to him there, in remembering that birthday night, and then he put his hand on the handle, though he knew it had all been locked up for the night hours ago.

But as he turned it, the door yielded to the pressure.

'Well!' he said, 'there's little enough to steal, but it's not like Miss Whateley to leave the place open like this.'

In the sitting room the lamp was alight, but turned very low, and there was a tray with a cup half full of tea, as if it had been prepared for an invalid.

‘Miss Whateley is ill,’ he said, with a sudden rush of indignation against Sybil, ‘and has been left all alone. After all she has done for that girl, the devoted love and care. It is too bad! It is too bad!’

And then he saw on the table, near the dim lamp, a long, soft, white, *Suède* glove.

Hullo! what did that mean? He took it up very gingerly, and held it between him and the lamp. There was no sign of soil or rent in it to account for its being discarded; it only seemed just to have taken the mould of a little hand.

They say that great geologists can build up a very lively picture of preadamite monsters from the inspection of one fossil bone. It did not need that glove to conjure up Sybil before Don’s eyes.

And then he saw something else on the table, an old, worn, telegram form, rubbed at the folds and crumpled, and on the form were the words, ‘Will you take care of the child for us. Come as early as possible and fetch her.—Sybil, Brooke Street.’

And underneath was written, in Miss Whateley’s shaky old hand, in pencil, ‘For Don.’

He was holding it in his hand when a footstep came softly down the stairs. Could Maria have learnt such

gentle movements instead of her usual, substantial tread? or was it Miss Whateley herself, come down to confront the midnight intruder?

But Don had hardly time to reflect how it would alarm the old lady to find a man standing there at dead of night, when the door opened, and Sybil came in, Sybil in her ordinary, every-day frock, not dazzling or resplendent, and with a small, wan, troubled face, and big, pathetic eyes full of great sorrow, into which crept a look of relief, and surely, surely, something else, as she saw Don, and stretched out her hands to him with a cry that had almost a sound of joy in it under all the pain. 'Don! oh Don! I knew you would come!'

And the next minute he had gathered her into his arms, and she was sobbing great, choking sobs against his broad, velveteen breast, where his heart was beating with great, happy throbs, hardly realising, in the joy of the way it was told, the sorrow she was telling.

'She had been so well all day. Not at all tired with the fête the day before, but talking of it all, and laughing at some of the things the people had said. I don't know when she had been so bright, and she kept talking of you, Don, and she said, "I am sure he will come to-night and keep me company while you are at the ball." I didn't know how to tell her I did not mean to go. I was afraid it would be quite a disappointment to her, she was so full of the dress and all. I fancied, once or

twice, that she was making believe to be so cheery and well just that I might go without feeling a bit anxious. Oh Don, thank God I didn't go! but I felt, somehow, I couldn't, not even if she were a little bit vexed about it.

'We had been cutting off some dead roses in the afternoon, and, when we came in, she sat down in the arm-chair, and I came and sat on the arm as I do sometimes—oh, Don, as I used to do—and I put my arms round her, and coaxed her to promise not to be vexed with me, and she promised—oh, Don, do you know what she said? "Vexed, my darling, I have never been vexed with you all your life." And then I told her I had sent a note up to Betty to say I was not coming. She only said, "Oh Sybby!" as if she were a little bit sorry, and then seemed quite satisfied about it. I think she really was pleased, and we had such a cosy tea together, and sat quite a long time afterwards, till it got quite dark, with me on a stool at her feet, and she stroking my hair and talking of years ago when I was a little child, and always of you too, Don, and how good you were to me. She made me find that old telegram my mother sent before I came. It was in her drawer in the table there, and she said, "I shall give it to Don some day," and she wrote your name on it. "He was always a great comfort to me," she said, "even when he was only a boy, for I knew he would take care of you. I always

knew you were safe with Don, and that's how it is I don't seem to worry a bit. Mrs Grant thought I must always be fretting as to what would become of you when I was gone, and perhaps I ought, but I don't, Sybby, I always think God will take care of her and Don."

' Oh, Don, do you know I think that was almost the last thing she said. The hand that was against my cheek grew a little cold, I fancied, and I took it in both mine, and held it to try and warm it against my neck, and I spoke to her once or twice, but she did not answer, and I thought she was having a little nap, as she used when we sat in the dark, and it was quite dark then, and I would not disturb her by moving to light the lamp, and when Maria came in to fetch the tea-things, I said "Hush!" but the light fell on her face, and then I saw, and Maria saw, and screamed out that she was dead. Do you know, Don, I was not so very much frightened, and I did not cry a bit till you came in. It was only like going to sleep and not waking up here, and it is so selfish to think of the loss. She never thought of herself, and I want only to be glad for her to-night, for it does not seem as if she could have gone very far away yet, quite beyond knowing and caring, and I couldn't bear to think that she was sorry, and she must be if she knew I was fretting.

' They stopped Dr Parkinson as he drove through on

his way to the ball, but there was nothing to be done, as, of course, we knew. He was very kind, and offered to stop for a bit, but I begged him not to, for I knew you would come. Maria had hysterics, and I and her mother had quite a trouble to bring her round. Her mother is very kind, but she seems to think that I want such a lot of tea, and she sighs so. Do you know, Don, she blew the candle out once with sighing, and I laughed. I am sure she thought me horrid and heartless, or else that it was the beginning of hysterics, but Auntie would have been so amused. I remember her laughing till the tears came into her eyes at something like that. But Mrs Toms has been very kind, she has been helping me. I wanted to do everything for Auntie myself, and no one else touch her, but I could not quite manage it, and Maria was afraid—fancy, Don, afraid of Auntie!—and would not come into the room. She looks so nice, Don, so quiet and happy and natural, and yet not just herself. She herself has gone, and even when I am up there by the bed, I keep wishing Auntie would come in and look at the dear, old face on the pillow that is so like hers. Mrs Toms was quite horrified because I wanted to sleep in my own little bed by her side. Why should I mind? But Mrs Toms would not hear of it, and has made up a bed for me in Maria's room.'

She said all this in little, broken bits, interrupted by

sobs, and sometimes by long silences, resting her head against his shoulder, and Don did not say much, only little, inarticulate murmurs of sympathy and comprehension, and that sympathetic silence that is more comforting than any words, holding her little hands in a strong, warm, reassuring grasp, drawing her head to rest more comfortably on his shoulder, sometimes with a hand trembling with its own audacity, smoothing back the tumbled curls from her forehead.

And presently Mrs Toms came stumping in with another cup of tea, and 'Didn't ought Miss Sybil dear to go to bed, and try and sleep a bit, poor lamb, as were quite worn out, and Maria, she've just drop off, as have a feelin' heart, and terrible took on about the old lady.'

'I couldn't sleep, Mrs Toms,' Sybil pleaded, 'I really couldn't. You go to bed. You've been so good to me, I don't know how to thank you,' and Sybil kissed the kind, fussy cheek, and Mrs Toms retired, sobbing convulsively in her apron.

'Sybby,' Don said, 'I have the care of you now, dear, and I think Miss Whateley would rather you went to bed.'

Which was noble self-sacrifice on Don's part, seeing that his arm was round her, and her hands in his.

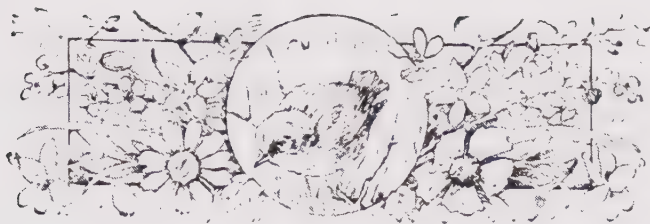
But first they went to say good-night to that still sleeper, lapped round with peace, on whose sweet, old

face there seemed to rest the satisfaction that comes with death's awakening.

As they stood there, hand in hand, Don said, 'Sybby, do you know, dear, there is only one way for me to take care of you as she wished.'

And Sybil, looking up at him with a glimmer of a smile through the tears in her eyes, said, 'Shall you mind it very much?'





CHAPTER XXXI.

A NEAR RELATION.

Truth that's brighter than gem,
Trust that's purer than pearl ;
Brightest truth, purest trust in the universe, all were for me,
In the kiss of one girl.

BROWNING.

I REALLY must go over to Hayhurst,' Mrs Harrington Jones said one morning nearly a week after the ball, 'and find out Sybil Harrington. I don't feel so sure in my mind about her marrying the Earl as I did. I shouldn't have thought that Lady Billington would have heard of such a thing, such a very haughty, high and mighty sort of woman as she is, and Sybil without a penny and such a notorious father as she had ! But really, that day I called, you might have thought it was a settled thing, she seemed quite like one of the family, and there was no mistaking the attention the Earl paid her. But it was odd that she was not at the ball,

though I think someone said Miss Whateley was ill, and I did not get a word with Lady Billington, or I would have inquired. I did not see Lord Billington pay any particular attention to any of the girls; indeed, I don't think he danced twice with anyone, unless it was that Miss Croker, who, I think, is horridly bad style, and very plain, and it was so ridiculous her pretending not to remember meeting me. Of course there were certain people he was obliged to dance with, and could not ask whoever he pleased. Not that, if he had been free to ask anyone, he would have been likely to ask either of you. I can't think what Madam Turquoise was about over those dresses; considering the price, they were not fit to be seen, and the skirts had no set about them, and, besides, Alice made herself so conspicuous with that horrid, vulgar doctor from Kingham, Parkinson, or whatever his name is. I saw several people noticed the noise you made over supper.'

'Mother's liver is out of order,' the girls said philosophically.

'At any rate,' Mrs Harrington Jones reflected, 'if Sybil Harrington is not going to marry the Earl, she is great friends with Lady Betty Brookfield, quite in and out there, and now Lady Billington knows we are related, she would think it odd if we don't know anything about her.'

So the first available opportunity Mrs Harrington Jones drove over to Hayhurst, the girls altogether declining to bear her company.

It was a much longer drive there than it had been from Colcroft, and through entirely different country, and it had been July, and hot and dusty then, and it was September now, cool and bright and fresh, with big masses of soft, white cloud forming capes and islands and promontories on the deep-blue sky, and the sound of guns coming from the turnip fields and stubble beside the road, and yet it brought back vividly to her mind that former drive, and her interview with Miss Whateley.

She did not exactly feel ashamed of her behaviour on that occasion, but she felt she had made a little mistake, and she quite intended to make up for it to-day by extra amiability to the old lady, who might indulge in eccentricities of dress and behaviour with impunity if she were the aunt of a countess.

Hayhurst struck her to-day as rather a pretty village, and the virginian creeper on Miss Whateley's house was beginning to turn crimson here and there, and toss little, rose-coloured tendrils across the windows.

Mrs Harrington Jones sailed up the garden path approvingly. The beds were gay with asters and

Japanese anemones, and golden rod and cactus dahlias.

‘It really does the old lady great credit,’ she said to herself.

She was rather glad Miss Whateley was not in the garden, as it would make the meeting easier if it did not too closely resemble the last.

In answer to the bell, Maria came to the door, wiping her hands on her coarse apron, and in reply to Mrs Harrington Jones’s inquiry, ‘Is Miss Whateley at home?’ opened eyes and mouth aghast at anyone being ignorant of an event of such world-wide importance.

‘Is the girl deaf or idiotic?’ Mrs Harrington Jones wondered, as she repeated the question rather sharply.

‘Please’m, the missus have been dead a week to-day.’

‘Dead!’ Mrs Harrington Jones stared at the girl as blankly as the girl had stared at her a minute before, and then recovered her gentility, and sank her voice to the appropriate tone of condolence.

‘Dear me! I had no idea! When did it happen? Had she been ill long?’

And Maria, who had exhausted all the auditors within reach some days ago, and was glad to find a fresh one, prepared to give her a detailed description,

but was cut short by Mrs Harrington Jones asking if Miss Sybil was at home, and making a decided movement forward towards the sitting-room door, and as she had acquired a good deal of portliness lately, the girl gave way before the superior weight of the vessel bearing down on her, and ushered her into the sitting room.

The room was a little dark after the September sunshine outside, so Mrs Harrington Jones did not clearly distinguish who it was who rose from her seat at the table to receive her, and she advanced with outstretched hands to embrace her.

‘Sybil, my dear girl! my poor child! I had no idea——’

And then stopped short as she recognised Lady Betty Brookfield.

‘Miss Harrington is out, but she will be in directly.’

‘I am sure I am speaking to Lady Betty Brookfield. I must introduce myself, as I don’t expect you remember me among all the guests at your delightful ball. I am Mrs Harrington Jones, a relation, a very near relation, to dear Sybil.’

‘Won’t you sit down?’ Lady Betty said. She had her grandmother’s intolerance of gush, without her grandmother’s power, acquired by many years of society life, of concealing it, and she had those steady, clear

eyes whose look is a perfect insult to insincere people.

‘I was so shocked, so inexpressibly shocked, to hear of dear Miss Whateley’s death. What a charming, old lady! What a loss to the neighbourhood!’

And Mrs Harrington Jones put her handkerchief to her nose and sniffed.

‘You knew her well?’ said Lady Betty.

‘No, I regret to say, not nearly so well as I could have wished. My place is at a considerable distance from here, and the old lady keeping no carriage, we could not see as much of one another as we should have liked. Had she been ill long? Was it not very sudden?’

‘Yes, quite sudden.’

‘When did it happen?’

‘On the 31st.’

‘The day of the ball?’

‘Yes, the day of the ball.’

‘Poor, dear child; what a shock it must have been! Why didn’t she write or send to me. I would have come at once, or one of the girls. She is so alone!’

‘I came to her directly I heard,’ Lady Betty said.

‘Oh yes, how kind and good of you! What a mercy that the poor girl had such kind friends so near. But,

of course, now she must make her home with us. It will not do for her to stop here, even if she wished it, and it must be terribly melancholy and sad for her. My girls will cheer her up; they will be nice companions for her.'

'We wanted her,' Lady Betty went on, 'to come to Billington, but she would rather not, so I am going to stay here with her till——'

She hesitated, and in that momentary pause Mrs Harrington Jones filled in the story with wonderful completeness. Sybil was engaged to Lord Billington, and as soon as decent time had elapsed after her aunt's death they were to be married, and the girl wished to be married from her old home. That was natural, perhaps, but she must be persuaded to give up the idea and come to Shirley, and the marriage should be from there, very quiet, of course, on account of the recent affliction, but with a mitigated gaiety such as might be consistent with her mourning, with Alice and Gertrude as bridesmaids, and paragraphs in the society papers, and so on, with such details and ramifications as would seem incredible to imagine in such a short time.

Lady Betty's next words, too, favoured Mrs Harrington Jones's conclusion.

'You know of her engagement?'

'Well,' Mrs Harrington Jones beamed all over—she

thought she would let Sybil call her 'aunt,' it was really very nearly that relationship—'I had not been exactly informed of it, but I drew my own conclusions, so I am not very much surprised to hear it.'

'Indeed?' Betty raised those dark eyebrows of hers, 'it was a very great surprise to us.'

Mrs Harrington Jones smiled and nodded meaningly. 'Ah, but they say lookers-on see most of the game.'

'Well,' Lady Betty went on a little sharply—she did not like to think of others being more in Sybil's confidence than herself—'the wedding is to be in three weeks, and I am to stay with her till then.'

'How kind of you!' Mrs Harrington Jones purred, 'but I could not hear of such a thing. She must come to me, and the marriage must be from my house. I feel just as I should about one of my own girls, and I am sure dear Sybil will agree. Of course there will be the trousseau to be seen to.'

Lady Betty gave a stiff, little bend of the head. She certainly was very like her grandmother, Mrs Harrington Jones thought, only remarkably plain.

'You know the gentleman?'

Mrs Harrington Jones gave a quick look at Lady Betty's face to see if she were chaffing, but she looked quite grave.

‘Well,’ Mrs Harrington Jones said, with a little simper, ‘not very intimately as yet, but I hope to become better acquainted with him soon. But, from all I know, I think Sybil is a lucky girl to have won the regard of such a man.’

‘Yes?’ said Lady Betty coolly, ‘I hope so.’

Mrs Harrington Jones was puzzled. Was she depreciating her brother, or was it to draw out further compliments?

‘I do not know enough of him to judge,’ Lady Betty went on, every word she said producing a more bewildering effect on her listener than the last. ‘I never saw him till last week.’

Mrs Harrington Jones’s face must have been a sight to see, and her feelings indescribable, the only comfort to her mortification being the feeling that she had not betrayed herself, and received the cruel snub that Lady Betty was quite capable of giving.

‘Indeed?’ she stammered, ‘I am not sure—perhaps I was misinformed, and that it is not the person I thought.’

‘I did not think it very likely you would have seen him,’ Lady Betty said. ‘It is Mr Donald Grant.’

And as Mrs Harrington Jones’s face betrayed no sign of recognition of the name, she continued, ‘He is a

son of the late vicar here, Mr Grant, and—he is quite a gentleman.'

Mrs Harrington Jones bridled a little, as who would say, 'So I suppose.'

'But he is, at present, head gamekeeper to Colonel Oliphant.'

Just then Don and Sybil were standing in the churchyard by the new-made grave, which was hard by the vicar's, the sunniest spot in all the place.

'Dear,' he was saying, 'I don't know even now if it is right to let you do it. It would be different if you were older, and had seen other men, but you have seen no one but me, and don't realise what a stupid, rough boor of a fellow I am.'

'Hush,' she said, putting up a little hand to stop his words. 'You must not say rude things of my sweetheart. And, Don,' she added, with a little flush, 'it's mean to tell about such things, and I didn't even tell Auntie about it, but you are not the only one who wanted to marry me. Lord Billington asked me on his birthday when we were going up to the stables.'

'Lord Billington?'

'Yes.'

'And what did you say?'

'I said I was very sorry, but I couldn't.'

'Oh, Sybil, an earl, and all that beautiful place!'

'Yes, it did seem a pity, didn't it?'

‘Then why didn’t you accept?’

‘That was just what he asked.’

‘And what did you say?’

‘Because I liked someone else better. For shame,
Don! Suppose Mrs Cullen was in her garden!’





CHAPTER XXXII.

WEDDING BELLS.

O happy hour, behold the bride
With him to whom her hand I gave,
They leave the porch, they pass the grave
That has to-day its sunny side.

TENNYSON



AND so Don and Sybil were married, and Lady Billington herself gave the bride away, and Lady Betty was bridesmaid.

Lord Billington had business abroad just at the time, and his grandmother never could make out what his real feelings were about that pretty, little girl, but she suspected that he was desperately hard hit.

‘It was really a very near thing,’ she used to tell herself, ‘and it was quite providential that dear, old thing dying just then, and the girl not coming to the ball, and this rustic Corydon, this great, handsome lout of a gamekeeper turning up at the right moment. I

believe Billington would have proposed the very next opportunity, and there's not a girl in England who could have refused an earl's coronet and a big estate.'

I sometimes wish, for the credit of her sex, that Lady Billington could have heard what Sybil told Don that September day by Miss Whateley's grave.

And sometimes, in the after days, but they were not very many in number, for Lady Billington did not long survive Miss Whateley, she pondered if it would not have been better if her grandson had married Sybil Harrington. He had certainly never appeared to such advantage as he did that first week at Billington, when he was under the glamour of her beauty. Afterwards, he was a little bit selfish and cynical, and had an affected, listless manner that was particularly irritating to his sprightly grandmother.

It was not to be wondered at if he were conceited, and gave himself the airs of a great Mogul, considering the revolting way he was run after by girls and their mothers; and when one name after another was coupled with his, Lady Billington was fain to confess that he might do worse than marry Sybil Harrington.

Mrs Harrington Jones caught such a severe cold on that long drive to Hayhurst that her doctors advised her wintering in the Riviera, otherwise, as she wrote to Sybil, she hoped she would have come to Shirley. She

trusted she would be happy, and would accept the little present she sent from herself and the girls, a biscuit box (that really looked as good as new when it was thoroughly cleaned up, and biscuit boxes are quite out of fashion now, but it would be very useful, no doubt, in a cottage).

When she came back in the spring she did not make any particular inquiries, or find it necessary to drive in that direction, and there was no call to return at Billington Hall, to bring her even so far on the way to Hayhurst.

‘You see, she was such a very distant relation of my husband’s, hardly to be reckoned any relation at all; and, of course, for the sake of the girls, I did not want to be mixed up with what was no doubt a *mésalliance*, though, of course, with such a father, and brought up in such a very humble way by that old Miss Whateley, it was not likely she would marry a gentleman.’

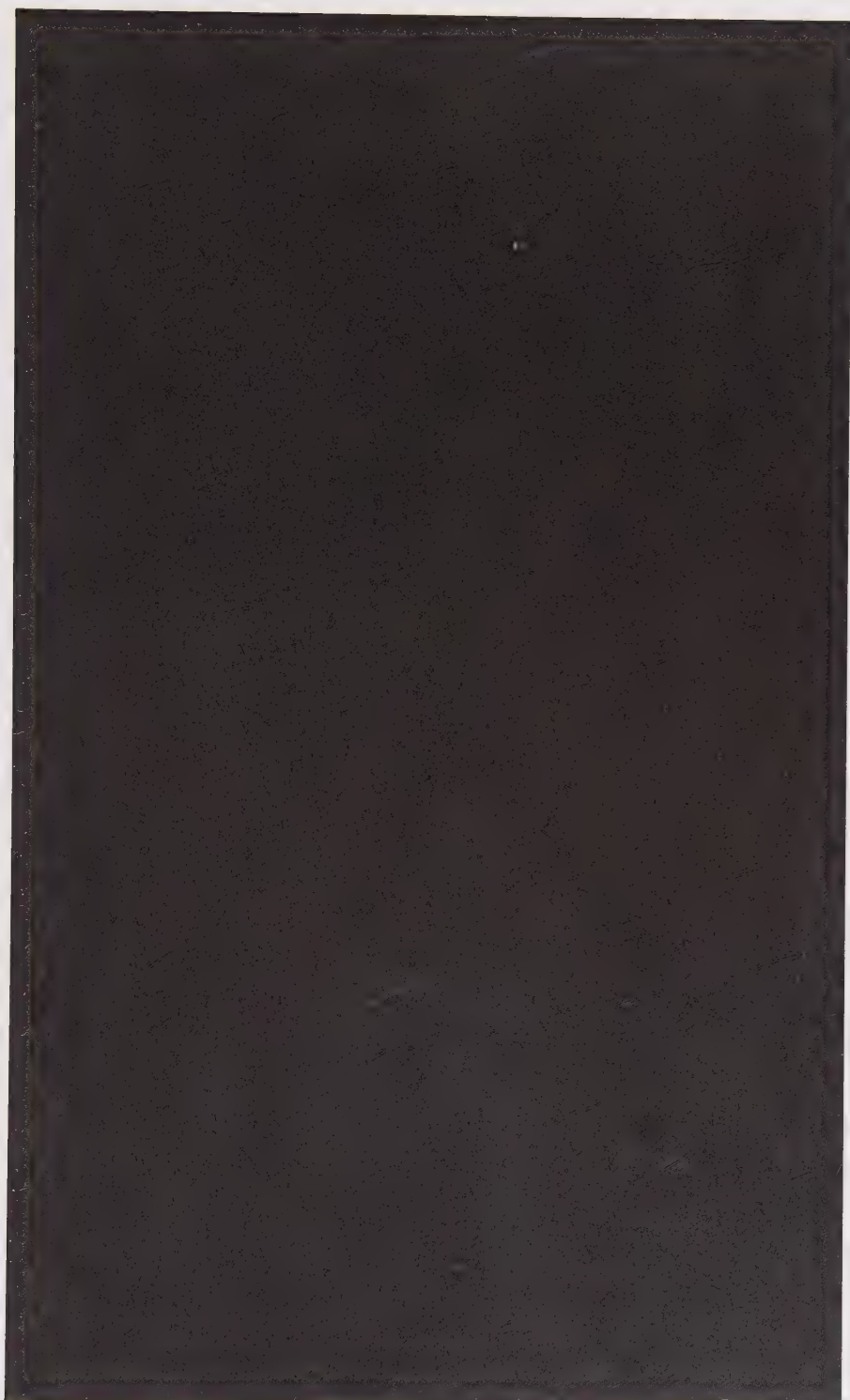
If she had taken the trouble to inquire, she would have learnt that, after a month’s honeymoon in the keeper’s cottage in the heart of the beautiful, October woods, all orange-tawny and crimson and dun, pale lemon and russet, with bright patches of scarlet berries and vivid green moss and shining ivy, they left the pretty, woodland cottage, and Hayhurst, and the sunny grave behind, and sailed away far west to find a new home in other lands.

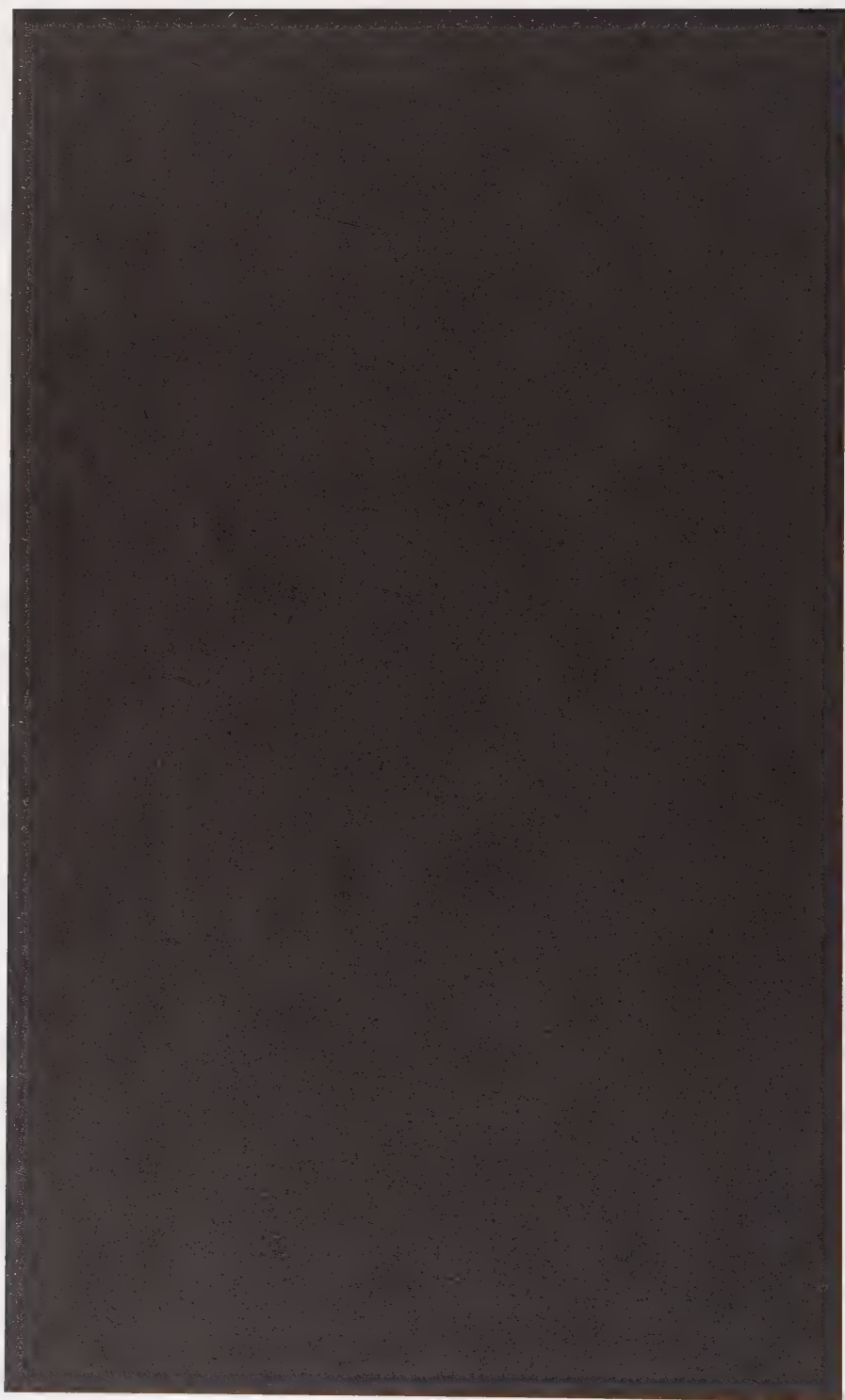
And what they did, and how they fared, this history telleth not, but I have no fears for their happiness, for they were together.

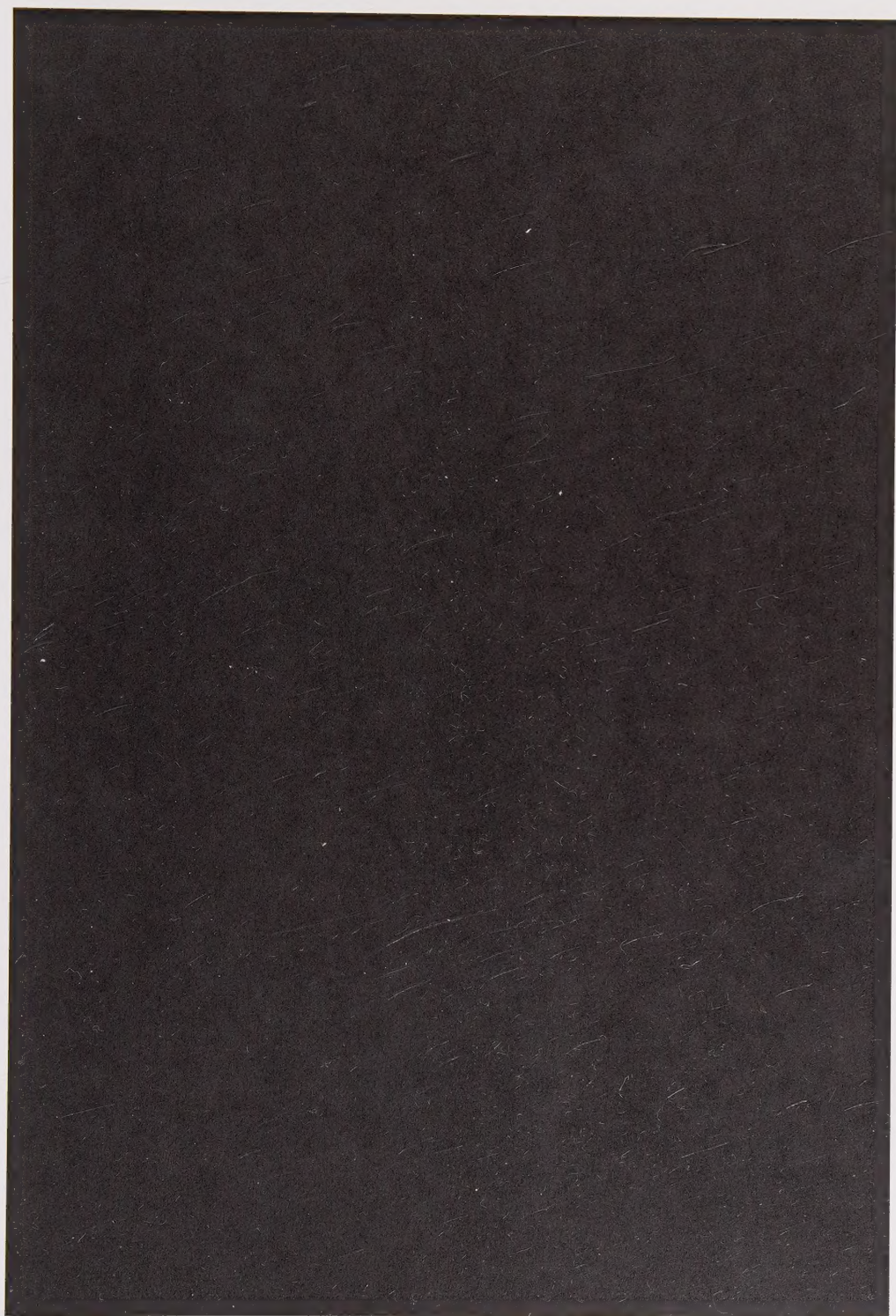
And on her lover's arm she leant,
And round her waist she felt it fold,
And far across the hills they went
To that new world which is the old.
Across the hills and far away
Beyond their utmost purple rim,
Beyond the night, across the day,
Through all the world she followed him.



THE END.









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